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The Healing Cane

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The healing cane

by

Melanny Cowley

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:
Stephen Pett, Major Professor
Linda Hasselstrom
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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2010

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THE HEALING CANE

MEGAN, OLIVIA'S Daughter,

January 27

The bus lurched forward and I fell, elbows first, into an old woman's lap. Her coarse gray hair smelled of mint, and I stared deep into the folds along the side of her face, a rich map of years burrowed over her youth with the distinct texture of tree roots. Her jowls dangled as she smiled, a kind gesture, uncommon in this part of Guatemala, a dingy city eighty miles from the capital where my plane ticket waited patiently in the airline printer, yet to be born. I apologized in Spanish, *excusa, excusa*, tried to smile back. The other passengers, all men, looked on, glaring as though they would rather not look at me, a distracting nuisance. People are rarely friendly in the middle of the night and some people had contempt for the missionaries, though I wasn't wearing my nametag. They blinked, looking away. The lights of the city evaporated, one by one and we drove through the black night, the sound of loose rocks from the dirt road banging under our feet with loud pings and clanks.

Dreams of serving in the mission field had occupied my mind as young as ten, and here I stood, surrendering a bit more of myself with every bus stop, every creak of the door, every shuffling pair of feet, on and off. They came from the blackness and they left into the blackness. Villages waited in the dark certainly, but still they terrified me, disappearing and appearing like that. Night workers. I couldn't even imagine working at night. I had slipped from the covers of my bunk at 1 A.M., patiently lying in the dark for four hours, watching the

numbers turn on my battery powered radio lying beside my head on a thin mat. I wanted to vanish while Sister Kimball slept soundly, giving myself the best possible chance of fleeing without a confrontation. I did not want my missionary companion to know I had doubts, let alone know that I intended to leave the mission. And the thought of facing the mission president turned my stomach.

How did I get here, running like a fugitive in a skirt with a Jansport backpack slung over my shoulder, feet braced shoulder width apart on the floor of a sour smelling bus? Where did the crisis occur? I didn't know exactly, although visions of my grandmother's funeral in Grantsville, Utah floated to the surface like air bubbles escaping from the subconscious. Aunt Taryn's book, undoubtedly, had shaken my mother forever, which in turn, had shaken me, like ripples in a disturbed pond. For months I had hated her, hated her pragmatic intellectualism, her smooth and cool skepticism, her arrogance. But by the time Aunt Taryn's thesis project had crawled beneath my mother's skin, had conceived in her an immense shift of the self, by the time I understood (fully realized, I think, on that flight to Guatemala) a similar shift would be just as likely in me, I stopped hating Taryn and began to wonder at what reservoir she drew such power.

Grandma died of lymphoma. A vibrant older woman the year previous, the cancer caught hold of her fast and hard, beating her within a few months. My mother came home from her death bed and told me that my grandmother was a fighter. I wondered what good it had done her. I had never lost anyone close to me before, and I indulged in bitterness though a voice inside told me that was wrong.

Aunt Taryn left the grave site service before the bishop had finished speaking. I whispered to Mom that I could follow her, but she didn't respond. I was closest to Aunt

Taryn out of all my aunts, though I also disliked her the most. She had been the shirking older sister I never had. Only seven years my senior, we had spent countless hours together on the ranch, planting watermelon, chasing lizards, throwing cups of water on each other when the opportunity presented itself. We looked alike, both tall with dark brown hair, green eyes, nothing like my mother's petite blond. I don't know why Taryn left the funeral.

Overcome with pain, or simply offended by the service, she gave no explanation and didn't turn up at the ranch house afterwards for the ritual meal of ham and funeral potatoes. Mom didn't seem to care, remarking to Aunt Cassie that Taryn often pulled stunts for attention. But Aunt Cassie, short like my mother, round in shape and face, and the only sister with a sprout of sandy curls, said she didn't know about that. Aunt Cassie didn't like confrontations, nor did she like to think bad about anyone, and she won each of us over with this tactic. Aunt Bekah, dropping into a chair, said she thought Taryn just needed some space, but yes, she thought Taryn was pretty offended by the service, seeing how the bishop took this as a missionary opportunity to preach the Lord's truth, said he knew their mother would have wanted him to do so. Whether Taryn was justified in this offense or not was a matter my mother wanted to settle with Aunt Bekah, since Aunt Cassie wouldn't play, and she thought very highly of my Aunt Bekah, though she often remarked behind her back about her weight. Aunt Bekah, a larger, older version of Aunt Taryn and myself with the same dark hair, same green eyes poking out from above the curve of her cheeks, said it was a bit tacky, considering how Taryn felt about the church, and she didn't know why he couldn't just talk about Mom and stick to that. We all know the church is true, she said, and those who don't know it aren't going to change their minds.

Then Taryn surfaced hours after the extended family had all gone, and she wanted to talk about her book. You promised, she said, you all promised you would all read it after Mom died. She's barely in the ground, my mother said, but eventually they all agreed it was time. They discussed this while patiently allowing Grandpa to interrupt, whose Alzheimer's had progressed significantly in the last week, and who was trying to pay bills fifteen years old. I did not know about the promise until that moment, and I was angry to be excluded and I never asked to see the book though I was curious and though I thumbed through the loose pages once in Mom's room when I was in search of a clean towel. After this agreement had been made, everything would change, though I had no way to predict its significance then, the way they nonchalantly moved on to Grandma's jewelry, as though they had settled a trivial matter of business, the way they next asked me about Jeff as though they had run out of interesting things to discuss.

I did not want to talk about Jeff. He should have been home from his mission by now, but as it were he had not even left. And one late night, over the sad, greasy lid of a pizza box, I said I didn't think he planned to ever go on a mission, and he said with a sigh of relief that he did not, and I think he thought I was giving him permission with my honesty, but instead I broke up with him within the week. And a month later he showed up with a bouquet of roses and the mission paperwork and said we would both go. We would leave at the same time, he an older missionary at twenty one. I would return six months earlier, (since women served eighteen months and men served the full two years) and I would wait, and then finally we could be married, and I tried not to think about how we could be married right now had he only left when he should have, and we made plans.

But then one week after my grandmother's funeral, Jeff appeared on my doorstep, a surprise since I thought he would be working the swing shift with his father's drywall company that night, and he wore such a defeated expression I waited for the news of some horrific accident, some fateful test of my faith in the face of the natural world and all its injustice, but instead, we sat across from each other on the sofas of my parents' living room as though we were conducting an interview, though I wouldn't know who was interviewing whom, and he told me, finally, that he could not give up two years of his life, that he simply did not want to go, and would not go. And I did not feel it was right for him to choose himself over me, over the church, and I told him this. And then he stood and walked out before the first tear formed in the bank of my eye, and it was over.

I believed in the back of my mind that Jeff would repent again, that he would come to do the right thing. I had always believed we would end up together someday, a personal truth in which I had invested a great deal of faith, and so when I heard the news from a friend only months later that Jeff had become engaged to a girl I didn't even know, (though I don't know what comfort it would have brought if I had known her) I sat in the flower patch in the front of my house, vaguely aware of the neighbors' stares driving past, and plucked every blossom I could find from the ground cover and the shrubs and the plants and tore the petals into fourths and patiently mounded one natural pile of pastel confetti, so stricken with grief it would be hours before I could bring myself to call my mother.

Even after losing Jeff, I did not question my mission call or my loyalty, but numbly endured my temple endowment ceremony a week before my mission, a bittersweet experience, coupling the unveiling joy of God's eternal truths with the bitter heartache of having my bridehood stripped from me. I endured the six weeks at the missionary training

center with deadened enthusiasm, throwing myself into Spanish and prayer, and it was not until the overnight flight to Guatemala, as I looked out the airplane window into the black night and imagined the earth below, all so impossibly black, a total nothingness I had somehow wanted, I had somehow sprinted towards, that it occurred to me that perhaps Jeff had not really failed me, but *I* had failed *Jeff*.

For four months I lived perplexed. When it didn't rain in Guatemala, the air wept, and we wore and ate mud a good portion of the time. I was utterly unaccustomed to humidity, having come from the Utah desert, and I often wished for a breath of air I would not have to drink. My first and only companion was Sister Kimball, a well padded girl with frizzy black hair, pale freckles and deep, dart-like dimples. When she ran in the rain, she could have produced a laugh from a terminally ill cynic, though I always protected her feelings and hid my amusement. When we weren't visiting families or knocking on strangers' doors, we often stole away with Brother Lawrence and Brother James, and though this was discouraged, it was not well enforced. Brother James, small and agile, could climb a tree as well as any monkey and he often collected guava or avocado for us in the church property trees, and I talked a long time with Brother Lawrence, who had a toothy smile, but nice eyes, and sometimes it occurred to me he would be a good husband, though it was ridiculous to think of him like this because he was only nineteen. One time, Brother Lawrence was throwing rotten guava at Brother James in the tree and we were all enjoying a laugh when a small boy came by on a squeaky bicycle and asked us why we were always so happy.

"Because we know the truth," Brother Lawrence told him, with all the charisma of Joseph Smith, "We know God's truth, and that makes us happy."

And I thought the boy would want to know more about that, but it seemed to satisfy him enough and he grinned at all of us as though this were an inside joke we all shared, and rode away on his broken bicycle, and Brother Lawrence sprinted after him crying out for his father's name and the boy screamed like a piglet and pedaled harder.

At times, I felt I was part of something important, something larger than myself, like the day we met Sister Fuentes, and I bore my testimony and she cried. But in other moments the same unanswerables which had shaken my mother followed me into this faraway land, rose up at unexpected moments, like when Sister Kimball said during a trailing discussion on doctrine, with a faraway look in her eye, that she supposed she would accept polygamy if it were reinstated again, or when Sister Fuentes, after her baptism, wanted to know why she should no longer hang her crucifix on the wall. Brother Lawrence smiled at her as though instructing a small child about why they should not wear mismatched socks, and explained to her, with an arm firmly on her shoulder, why God would rather she didn't.

Sister Fuentes had other issues with her conversion. She did not understand why, if we had a Mother in Heaven, we could not pray to her. It had been this doctrine of Mother in Heaven, mentioned offhand in a conversation in our initial meeting that had caught Sister Fuentes by the heart. "I always knew," she said. But when Brother Lawrence explained that we did not pray to Mother in Heaven, Sister Fuentes immediately wanted to resume her prayers to Mary, and she grew increasingly frustrated with the missionaries for telling her she could not.

"Poor Sister Fuentes," Sister Kimball said to me later, in our tiny, humid, dirt-clad apartment, "She just doesn't understand."

“Neither do I,” I said, in a weak moment of honesty. Sister Kimball, who had been unclipping our laundry that hung across the small room on a white cable, cradling our damp clothes like flat, headless bodies, stiffened with one arm in the air, and dared to look at me. When I defiantly met her gaze, she turned. We did not speak of it again, I think because for Sister Kimball, to do so would have been a sin, and I died a little inside, knowing that. That night, I set my backpack aside.

The bus lurched forward again, but this time I was ready, caught the railing with my free hand, and smiled down once more at the woman, who blinked and smiled at me sleepily like a content cat. A crucifix flashed against her hollowed, dark throat, and I gestured to my own neck.

“*Bonita*,” I said. Beautiful. She dipped her chin to her chest.

“*Gracias*.”

I left because of Sister Fuentes, because I couldn’t take part in her spiritual disappointment any longer. I left because I had sacrificed love to be here and I did not deserve to stay. And I left because I cried at night for my mother.

BEKAH

April 29th (nine months earlier)

Rain wept down the windshield as I squinted through the glass, searching, every other moment, for the lines in the road. The radio muttered in drowned tones, then spit out a low rumbling of *Hotel California* beneath the noisy, hot breath from the heater.

What is wrong with you?

It was late. Maybe eleven. Isabelle and Brayden were probably in bed. Hopefully. Jared had texted four times in the last ten minutes. Where are U? U OK? Call me. Hello?

What would I say when I got there? I was at the store. *Until eleven o'clock at night?* I could predict, and accurately time, the intimation in his tone, the four lines rising together like knives between his eyebrows.

The cart was mostly empty. I had a budget. Ground beef for \$1.89 a pound, eighty percent. Sara Lee bread for \$1.68. Chips, milk, fudge stripe cookies. Maybe a few other things. Mostly empty. I walked out with two sacks. Ten minutes worth of shopping swallowed by hours.

I walked slowly, I remember, thinking that I should hurry, that Isabelle had soccer and Brayden had a play date, or was that tomorrow? Activity Days with the girls, and I had to go tonight because the other leader wouldn't be there. Jared would have to pick up Isabella. My presentation on the new Valley weekly insert would commence at eight AM, and I hadn't even started. I had forgotten to leave the menu out that morning so Jared wouldn't know what to fix. I texted him: Chicken strips.

Then, time stopped.

I had never before noticed the number of varieties of bread on the shelves in Macey's. Wonder, Macey's brand, Old Home, Sara Lee, Grandpa Lynn's. Wheat, white, sourdough, cottage, foccacia, flatbread, baguette, French. I suppose there existed a small part of my brain that said, *what are you doing? You need to hurry*. I don't know where that part of my brain went. I processed, simply processed like a machine. I walked the aisles, staring at jam jars, names of sodas, waters, beers, forming the names with my lips in little whispers, inching down each aisle with my squeaky cart. Shopping, I was shopping. And nothing else. No, nothing else.

When I found the cheese aisle, the phone rang, and I reached down into my purse to pull out Jared's frozen face, covered by his name. Parmesan, Pizza, Mexican Blend, Colby Jack. I turned the phone off. I wanted to turn it off more than anything. And I did. Mild Cheddar, Medium Cheddar, Sharp Cheddar. And Cheddar Cheddar. Just cheddar.

What is wrong with me? I rubbed my temple, and looked about, as though someone might approach me, a stray animal. A woman said, "Excuse me" and reached past me for the Cheddar Cheddar, but she did not look at me. She had a slick, black ponytail and a bright red, V-neck T-shirt. Graceful and beautiful, the way she reached over and pulled the cheese off the rack. *It can't really be that easy*, I thought, though I didn't know what I was saying, or rather, thinking. I stood there for a long time, looking at cheese, pinned to the floor by the truth.

Something is really wrong with me.

More unsettling than this knowledge was the simple fact that under this level of awareness, I still did not move. Not only was something very wrong with me, I did not want to do a thing about it. I only felt that I *should* want to.

In the car, the phone rang. When had I turned it back on? I think I had done this before I made it to the lane of shoppers at the register, lingering over a cardboard tray jugged with five-dollar DVDs.

“Are you checking out?”

I turned, face to face with a nametag flashing under fluorescent light. Tim. His salty hair thinned at the top, revealing the crown of midlife. His glasses, thick and smoky with age, slipped a centimeter down his sweat-slicked nose.

“Yes,” I said. Sentiment leaked out with the word. Eagerness?

I am checking out.

I set the cruise. I turned off the heater. I didn’t answer the phone. It rang and rang, like a cat mewing methodically behind a locked door.

The last ten minutes fell silent. I turned off the radio, now irritated by any noise. I pulled the van into the driveway and stepped onto the black grass. Lights out. I don’t know what I expected. Lights on, I suppose. I looked for movement in the second story windows, but they stared back, dark and empty.

Mother’s pedal-foot sewing machine greeted me in the entry, illuminated by the ominous pale light leaking through the wide crack of the den door.

The family portrait hovered over me from the wall behind the machine. Isabella’s mousy hair parted to the wrong side, though we had squirted it down four times. She wore the floral print that “no respectable girl of twelve should have to wear,” according to my

sister Taryn, but I forced her anyway. Brayden, seven, sported a cut on his forehead in this portrait. We were going to edit it out, but changed our minds because it was expensive. He looked unnatural with his hair combed and lying flat. I didn't really recognize him. My smile is glued to my face beneath my shiny, happy hairdo. Dark brown and red highlights that cost over a hundred dollars and then faded under three weeks. I took three days to pick out that dress and I still look fat. Jared, to me, is the only one who looks happy. His dark blue dress shirt draws me in to his green eyes, innocuous and light beneath his gelled, blond spikes. His expression exudes mirth and joy, unlike me, who fought battles of attire, buttons that wouldn't stay, and the final Armageddon of hair in crisis.

Good heavens, I look fat. Anytime I tried to diet, Jared resisted. *You look fine. People are too obsessed these days with being thin*, he said. Anytime I wanted to make fish or salad for dinner, it was all grumbles, but I noticed sometimes that he left the largest pork chop for me. He took good care of himself, up at six in the morning with me to jog the neighborhood while I got the kids ready for school. I often sensed he was too good for me, and I made an effort to compensate, came home each day from work to start dinner and press his shirts, running myself ragged for his praise.

"This family would fall apart without you, Bekah," Jared said, "You are like the cogs in a clock."

I ate this up, along with a second helping of pie, and then I straightened the house in the evening, answered my emails, and got up the next morning at six a.m. to do it all again because I lived on that love. Jared's words were my manna.

Perhaps I needed it that way. Perhaps I needed him to be happy, as proof that I could be happy too. It worked, I thought.

The smiles in the portrait shifted into sinister grins as the light from the den brightened with a creak of the door hinge.

“I’ve been calling you all night.”

The light illuminated Jared from behind, a shadowed face. I felt strange, like I had taken painkillers and they were beginning to wane. The real world solidified around me, a vortex of stripe prints and green apple chiffon paint. Jared, still dressed in brown oxford shoes and a navy tie, stretched his arms across the doorframe and stared at me with red-rimmed eyes.

I know he waited for me to say something. I clutched my bag and stared at the carpet, at the pee stain Brodie left on the floor last week. I had scrubbed it. I guess it didn’t come out.

“Where were you?” Jared asked.

The pressure to say something pressed down on me. I clutched my chest with my right hand, rubbed the top edges of my collarbones with my thumb and fingers. Mother’s cuckoo clock clouded my thoughts with its obnoxious ticking from the hallway.

“I was at the store,” I said.

“All night?”

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Chock. Chock. Chock.

Tick, chock. Tick, chock.

“That clock is loud, isn’t it?” I asked, “I think I’m going to ask Olivia if she wants it. I’m pretty sure she wanted it. She had a funny look on her face when Cassie handed it to me.

I think maybe Mom promised it to her a long time ago. It will go better with her antique theme, anyhow.”

I moved into the kitchen and lifted a glass from the cupboard, swinging over to the fridge and setting the dispenser for ice, chopped. Jared followed me into the kitchen, stretching his arms out on the edge of the island. The icemaker screeched alive, crushing and grinding. I thought Jared would tell me to stop, that I would wake the kids, but he didn’t.

“Hon, we need to talk,” he said.

He sounded so *nice*. I didn’t really understand myself why I withdrew from him, why I sidestepped and jerked my shoulder out from under his hand.

“What is going on here?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you know what I went through tonight? People were calling to find out where you were, and I didn’t know what to tell them!”

“Who?” I asked.

“Sister Brown called to make sure you were covering Activity Days, and I didn’t know where you were, so she went over and covered for you. She had to miss her daughter’s piano recital!”

“Who else called?”

“The kids kept asking when you were coming home. Brayden cried when you weren’t there to put him to bed. I didn’t know what to make for dinner. I tried calling you a thousand times!”

“Who else called?”

“I don’t have a pressed shirt for tomorrow.”

“Who else called?” I asked again.

Tick, chock. Tick chock. Tick chock.

I answered for him, “Nobody. Nobody else called. You were exaggerating.”

“Is this some kind of joke?” Jared asked, “Am I being Punk’d?”

“I texted you about dinner,” I said, “Did you get the message? Chicken strips!”

I ripped open the freezer door, and flung the chicken strips on the island. The box slapped against the counter with a frozen thud. We stared at the box together, and watched the ice crystals form like rapidly growing mold over the poorly photographed image of breaded poultry.

“I don’t understand,” Jared said, throwing his arms in the air as though I held him at gunpoint.

“You know what I don’t understand?” I asked, “*Why I have to do everything.*”

“I’ve never seen you like this.”

Jared shook his head as though he couldn’t accept what I had become. I felt I had grown fangs, or murdered an innocent, or had become possessed. I felt haunted. I felt evil. But greater than the frightening, unavoidable anger which bubbled within me, grew the sweet delight of inhabiting a person I had not been before. In the kitchen that night, I was not fully conscious of this feeling of spiritual mitosis. It floated above me like a cloud, and I could not quite see it or touch it. But, Oh! How I yearned to reach behind that mental veil and cling to that part of me. How close I felt to it when I pulled anger from the dark recesses of my shell and held that pain up to the light.

“Nobody has seen me like this,” I said, “Not even me.”

“Do we need to get you some help?”

He said this quickly. Too quickly. How many times had I made dinner with a headache, or left work to pick up a sick child, or stayed up late during tax season with a novel, simply to keep him company while he crunched away on accounts? How many times had I thrown myself over for all of us? The one who finished her degree at night school. The one who quit to stay home. The one who found the job that would allow the one to be home when the children arrived from school? And why is it that none of these decisions had been the one’s decisions at all? And why was I only realizing it now? Was it really any shock that Jared would suggest that I need “help” in the face of such brutal honesty? Was it really any surprise that he would fail to see that this “help” he spoke of could possibly come from him, that he not only had built the dam, but had helped to break it?

“Stop it,” I said.

“Okay.”

The tears arrived at last, cool and harsh, when I had long given up on them. I crumpled to the floor, the cold, porous metal of the fridge shocking the backs of my bare arms. Jared knelt beside me and gathered me up like a doll.

“What is this about?” he whispered. “How can I help?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

Now this was a lie. But it’s a funny thing about kindness. It has a way of confusing you, of easing the truth so that you can’t quite recall what possessed you to be hurt in the first place. Wrapped in the intoxication of a hug, it can seem a petty thing to feel what you feel.

“You know what I want?” I asked him, “I want to go on that trip to San Francisco. Carl wants the story, and I want to go.”

“Is he going to pay for it?”

My guts wrenched inside me. I laid a hand on my belly, disguising the pain. We did not need to finish this conversation, according to my intestine. Parts of me already knew how this would end.

“No. I talked to him two days ago. He said he can buy the airfare, but I would need to buy hotel and food. The budget’s tight. But it’s six months away. We could save up.”

I stared at Jared, and Jared stared at the linoleum. He pretended to consider it. I say, “pretended” but I don’t know that he pretended. Perhaps he had always mulled things over. Always falling to the side of “no,” but always mulling over the pros and cons carefully before determining yet again that the fairest choice would be for me to forego my desires.

“I’m just not sure if that would be best for the kids,” he said.

“But *you* leave all the time,” I said.

“Yes, but they’re used to that. Who knows how they would react if you weren’t here.”

The light in our kitchen, tulip bulbs under a white fan, liquefied and spread across the ceiling in a haze of tears. The numbness returned, inoculating me with visions of the cheese aisle in Maceys.

I am checking out.

My cell phone rang from inside my purse on the counter. Jared moved aside, his warmth vanishing. The green lights from the stove flicked to eleven o four as the muffled peal persisted.

“Do you want me to get it?” Jared asked.

“I’ll get it.”

I dragged myself from the floor and pulled the phone out, Cassie’s curly hair and shy smile looking back at me. I tried to answer, but missed her by a moment. She had left a text:

“Dad is missing! Help!”

“I have to go!”

I snatched the purse back and fumbled the keys into my fingers.

“What’s going on?” Jared asked.

“I just have to go. Cassie needs help with Dad.”

“Right now?”

“Yes. Right now.”

I didn’t tell him Dad was missing. I wanted him to believe that I might just walk out without a good reason.

“Wait,” he said.

I walked out of the kitchen, and he pounced behind me like a cat, pinching my left bicep under his vice-like fingers. I twisted away, bracing myself for his anger, but instead faced his fear. His complexion waxed white as though milk had been poured in through the top of his head.

“We need to talk,” he said, “We need to figure this out.”

Jared once climbed an apple tree in my parents’ orchard to rescue our white farm cat, Creamer, who had not only stranded himself in the tree, but had his tail recently mangled in my father’s tractor. When I tried to climb the tree, he howled and scrambled further out on the limb, switching his hideous red tail like a threat. I climbed down and called out Creamer’s name between sobs, hovering on the ground below the limb in case he fell. Jared

happened to be driving by and saw the trouble. Years later, he confessed he had spotted me in the orchard alone and thought he might steal a kiss. I was fifteen. He was seventeen. I remember the way his white trainers eased up the tree, his lean, muscular arms stretched open, the flapping of his red cotton t-shirt inflated with wind. His steady green eyes filled with determined sincerity, he called to the cat in reverence, *It's alright, come on, now, little kitty. It's alright*. Creamer clearly didn't want to move, and yet the voice compelled him against his will to trust, to mew back his uncertainty and put forth paw to the branch, inching towards his coach. That day, the cat and I were smitten.

I didn't know where the boy had gone. Certainly he didn't turn into a man. And certainly he would never become a man with troubles and responsibility, who slowly learned to control everything and everyone around him instead of simply sucking in the pleasure of living. Certainly he would not grow to be one who clung so tight to holding on that nothing could truly be held. Certainly that boy is still driving that truck through the backcountry, scoping the horizon for lone girls, searching for the chance to be someone's savior.

CASSIE*April 29th*

I had the first panic attack the night Dad disappeared in the fields, two weeks after my sisters and me had agreed to read the book, and three weeks after Mom died. I'm not entirely clear which of the three events brought it on, and it certainly could have been the culmination of all three.

In certain moments those first weeks after Mom's passing, I ached for her, like when I pushed her dresses to the back of the closet and the scent of sweat and hay drowned me (why did she always smell like a man?), or when I thought back on the two of us caring for Grandmother's roses in the front yard while my sisters hibernated in their rooms. Or when we stayed up all night before Thanksgiving to bake pies as we tossed jokes back and forth like a game of ping-pong, laughing ourselves drunk with fatigue, passing off our tired headaches with diet cola. When I thought back far enough, I recalled the validation of fat rows lining her forehead while she slipped into thought, or the comfort of her caked leather hands working a bulb into the soil, then reaching for another.

These memories, however, felt distant to me, as though they had happened to another girl from another time I had read about in a book. My mind preferred to peel back fresher memories, flashbacks of the nursing home, of Mom's cold, glass eyes, and her skeletal hands, unjustly white and faded from her absence in the fields. The horror of the lymphoma, the hidden lumps feasting silently, rising in hard lumps beneath the skin.. How could she rid herself of that which was part of her, that which had sprouted from within? I could not tear from my mind the image of my mother's little mouth gaping, her lips hidden beneath the

culvert of lines surrounding that black, helpless hole. If I close my eyes, I can still see the tiny brown flowers on the paper Dixie cup and I can still hear the sound of the small plastic spoon disturbing the ice chips.

It made sense that mostly I attended her at the end, being the only child still living in Grantsville, and also a registered nurse. Still, I had my moments of irrational bitterness as Bekah rushed in one day and immediately pointed out that a piece of orange jello had not been removed from Mom's cheek, or when Taryn stepped on the oxygen tube on her way out the door and didn't even stop to watch me fix it. Olivia wept so loudly at her passing that a nurse entered the room just to hold her. The same nurse who on several occasions called me the good daughter, always in attendance. I wanted to scream, let alone weep, but I was supposed to be comfortable with death.

And so I rationed my tears and took Dad upon myself, placing Mom to the back of my brain, like a mother moving from one baby to the next. Olivia wanted him in a home. Taryn, in graduate school at the moment and existing on little income, thought I ought to be given a chance. Bekah agreed with Olivia, that it would be too much burden for me. I perceived Bekah's concern for me to be sincere, whereas Olivia appeared to be harboring fear of my incompetence. Olivia has no tolerance for incompetence.

Perhaps Olivia's lack of trust drove me into this place of insanity. As I moved half our toys and the playpen into the ranch house, Garrett told me I was nuts, though he worked so many hours that time of year he could hardly tell me not to. Some nights he walked the three doors down to the ranch house to keep me warm, and other nights he drove straight home. I often woke in the morning, under my grandmother's cool, peach quilt, not altogether sure if Garrett had been there or not. He quietly requested that I stop this, and find a new

place for Dad. He pointed out that when construction season waned in the fall, he would be wanting his wife back, that we couldn't keep "all the balls in the air" as he said.

I agreed, verbally. Nagging doubt ransacked the cupboards of my mind, seeking shelves of fear to snack on. It used to be Mom whose voice played back like a recorder when I found myself alone with my inadequacy. Now I heard Olivia. *Dear, you shouldn't be working this hard. Oh Dear, don't you think it would be best if we...* And although Olivia gave me a good reason to end my nonsense, I felt more paralyzed by the persistent, unidentified voice that would not allow me to relinquish my father.

Amanda and Chloe adapted to the change in routine by chasing Hugh, the old family dog, an Australian Blue Heeler. His left eye, lined with yellow goop, required a routine of meds and eye drops. I, in turn, constantly chased the girls over the hardwood floors, trying to keep them away from the infection. For Amanda and Chloe, three and two years old respectively, reprimands only served as a brief distraction from this happy task. They squealed and chased after him again as soon as I turned my back, a pack of brown and blond pigtailed in hot pursuit, clacking over the floorboards. Some days I put Hugh in the barn, though I felt tremendous guilt over it. Mom always kept him inside.

It was not a good time for Mom to die. Amanda and Chloe were at an age of constant supervision, though admittedly an earlier age would have been more difficult. I worked daily to close the gap between the temperaments of my two girls. Amanda, outgoing and confident, took advantage of Chloe's contented and passive demeanor. She often pushed Chloe down for a toy, or took food off her plate during lunch, namely sweets. A lot of times Chloe wouldn't cry, which meant a lot of inappropriate behavior probably went unchecked as I

assured Dad we would feed the chickens today, or helped him sort out a seed order from two decades ago because it was simpler to avoid an argument.

I collapsed in Mom's recliner at the end of each day, exhausted, keenly aware that my long shifts at the hospital seemed downright cushy in comparison. I prayed from the chair, eyes closed behind my glasses, arms flopped open on the armrests as I asked for strength. God felt far away, a fair-weather friend, spanning the distance of the cosmos and perpetually wrapped up in the important folks in the world. I was, of course, undoubtedly wrong about God, which is why I never told anyone these feelings, but simply wondered at my own inability to perceive truth.

I read the book in the quiet hours when everyone slept, under the glow of the orange lamp and under the watch of the family portraits lining the room with several versions of each of us daughters in the various stages of youth. In that solitude, I read a different story than the one I had been taught my whole life, and although I didn't know at first what I should think of it, this alternate reality popped into consciousness at the oddest moments, while braiding Amanda's hair in the morning, or while changing the radio station in the car, or while watching my father at lunch eat his carrots, looking out the window for a sign of life as though prison masqueraded as home.

I wanted to ask him, *did you ever wonder if it wasn't true?* So one day, at lunch, I did, since he didn't recall one conversation to the next, and none of what I said mattered now anyhow.

"If what wasn't true?" he asked.

"The church, Dad. The church. Did you ever wonder if it wasn't true?"

He stared at me a long moment, a strand of gray hair nearly in his eyes. Most of my life I had never seen him this way, unwound, disheveled, and I wondered if in any moment a sly truth would shake loose.

“No,” he said.

He reached for the pickles.

That night, Dad disappeared. I discovered his absence after I had finished reading for the evening and walked through the house, checking the rooms. Mom and Dad’s bed lay empty, the covers ripped back. On the floor, Hugh lifted his head off his paws and waited to see if I would call him.

“Dad? Dad?”

I walked through the other rooms calling him, until I found the back door open. I whispered a prayer, calling and texting Bekah while rummaging for flashlights in Mom’s hutch, then rummaging for batteries. When Bekah finally called me back, I pulled the cell phone from my jacket while pinching the flashlight between my knees, scattering a nearby stinkbug with the light.

“I’m on the road,” Bekah said, “I got your text. What happened?”

“I was reading. He must have left then. I didn’t hear the back door. I’ve been up and down the fields, Bekah, and I don’t see him.”

I began to cry.

“It’s okay. Check the orchard. I’ll be there soon.”

Don’t call Olivia, I forgot to say, though I didn’t believe she would. I circled the black trees, calling out “Dad,” imagining his shadow splitting from a tree trunk like

replicating DNA. I tripped over a wooden spool I hadn't seen, scrambling upright again to brush the sandy crumbs from my pants and shake them out of my curls.

The moon watched.

Twenty minutes later, Bekah's headlights flashed up the driveway. I broke into a sprint as I neared the house, and handed her the other flashlight as she stepped out of her van. She still wore wool pants and yellow heels from work. The two of us walked wordlessly into the fields, in opposite directions, alone, but no longer unaided. Within minutes Bekah called out to me.

"Cassie. He's here."

I followed her light to the far end of the north field, where Dad crouched in the dirt, his forearms and face coated in soil, yanking at the black, plastic, drip line. Bekah shone the light on him casually, apparently waiting for me before she intervened.

"Dad, what are you doing?" I asked.

"We've got to lay this line," he said, "Planting soon."

I knelt beside him and placed a hand on his shoulder, pressing my fingers into the sweat and spongy flesh.

"Dad, we laid this last week, remember? It's new. Olivia came out, and she helped me lay it down. You were here," I said.

"The line's gotta be cut."

Bekah knelt to his other side, placing one knee, then the other in the sand.

"What do you mean, Dad?" she asked.

"I always put the line down. I can't trust it if I didn't put it down."

"So, that's what this is about," I said, standing and throwing my hands in the air.

I stepped away, considering a quick walk to cool down, believing we would be there all night, but Dad surprised me and stood. I halted, and a large stick on the ground caught my eye. I shined my light over the ground, and Dad crouched and snatched the stick, pressed it against himself.

“Wait—What is that?”

I shined my light over his chest, and under the yellow glow, I recognized the square aluminum cap on the knob of the healing cane, a family heirloom, a family secret.

“Dad, why do you have that out?”

I had not seen the cane in years, though I knew where he kept it wrapped up in the back of his closet. Dad inherited it from his great grandfather, and he said it was made from the coffin of Joseph Smith when they moved his body from Carthage Jail, that his hair was kept inside, though he had never peeled back the seal to confirm this. About ten years ago, Olivia did some research and confirmed such canes did exist, although whether it was actually this type of cane as Dad claimed, we didn’t know. Olivia tried to convince him to take it to a historian, but Dad would have none of it, believing the cane to be intended for him and fearing someone would try to take it. “Don’t you even tell anyone we have it,” he told us firmly, and we left the issue alone. We were never allowed to take it out, and Dad himself almost never did, although I remembered one time when I was a child he used it to pray over a sick cow, and truth be told, the cow did get better.

“I am seeking further light and knowledge,” Dad said.

“Dad, you shouldn’t have that out,” I said, though I don’t know why. What did it matter if he used his healing cane? It was his after all.

“Did you think the field was sick?” Bekah said, though to me, this seemed quite the creative stretch.

“You don’t have the right to the lay the line,” he said, “Nobody gave you permission.”

“You’re right, Dad. We’re sorry.”

Bekah coaxed Dad to follow her back inside. We walked in silence to the house, and through the open back door. I wet a towel and gave it to Dad to clean off before we went out again. We needed to rebury the line, so I placed a planter against the door so we could better hear if he left again. I lifted two shovels from against the house as Bekah kicked off her shoes, peeled down her ankle nylons, then pulled off the pricey wool pants and walked out on the sand in her knee length garment underwear, the white nylon fabric reflecting blue from the moon. She took a shovel from me.

“Think the slacks will be all right?” I asked her, taking care to match her pace.

“I checked them while we were in the house. They looked good.”

“I might find you some pants,” I said.

“There’s nothing you have that would fit me. Or mother.”

She said this gently, resigned to her size, but assured by her imperfection. She worked without complaint, carefully checking the plastic line inch by inch with the flashlight until she felt satisfied we could rebury it. Dad had pulled up four rows. We shoveled.

“Do you remember the time Dad got mad at you for baptizing the cats?” I asked her.

Bekah laughed.

“Yeah, I remember that,” she said, “We were such crazy kids.”

I tried to think of another time we had laughed over this story, but I couldn't think of one. "Dad gave us that long lecture, about priesthood authority, remember? How God gave it to Joseph Smith, and through him, it was given to other men, and any other act in God's name was an abomination?"

Bekah worked silently in the dark. I wished I could see her face.

"I remember," she said. The laughter had left her.

"You know, what I remember most about that isn't Dad at all. It was Mom."

"Mom?"

"Yeah. When Dad started saying all that, I remember Mom's face went kind of cold and blank, as though she was trying not to remember something horrible that had happened to her. I think it upset her."

"Huh," Bekah said, "I don't remember that."

"Bekah, have you been reading that book?"

"You mean Taryn's book?"

"Yes."

The sound of Bekah's shovel skipped a beat.

"Yeah, I'm about fifty pages in, is all."

My heart, already charged from the shoveling, swelled into my eardrums. I took some deep breaths, and considered letting the discussion die. It felt like discussing a horrific train wreck, and yet, to not speak of it at all felt like death from the inside out. I couldn't contain this incessant knocking within me.

"Has it been bothering you?" I asked her.

"No. Why? Has it been bothering you?"

“I’ve been thinking about it,” I said, “A lot.”

“Really?” she said, “What bothers you?”

The flashlight, laying sideways in the dirt to provide luminosity for our work, spun out when I kicked it stepping backward to better see the drip line. I muttered an apology and resituated the light. I stepped carefully back over the flashlight as we weaved dirt back and forth across the line in rhythmic waves. We worked in harmony, a community cross stitch of earth sealed in moonlight.

“I don’t know,” I said, gripping tight around the shovel, “Some of the history. All that stuff about Joseph Smith’s wives.”

“I wouldn’t give it too much credence, Cassie,” Bekah said, “There’s a lot of stuff out there about Joseph Smith. We weren’t there.”

“Did you ever wonder if it might be true? Have you ever thought about what that would mean?”

Bekah’s work slowed as we neared the end of the row, or did the conversation cause her to dawdle?

“But, you know Joseph Smith was a prophet. You have a testimony. I *know* you do.”

The urge to speak vanished, my stomach churning and wringing inside me. More than Bekah’s unwillingness to consider evidence, more than her presumptions about what I felt or believed, swelled the horrid, stinking fear, the shameless panic I had felt so many times before—the same panic in Bekah’s voice. Her fear mirrored my own on so many occasions, shelved and piled moments of dread, daring too close to that empty abyss, and I had no strength to shoo it out of me.

We finished. We walked to the house, and Bekah slipped into her trousers on the back porch, and we stepped inside. I flicked on the sink light, a dim light that wouldn't pain our eyes, and poured Bekah a glass of water, then one for me. My stomach calmed. Bekah took small, tired sips, her brown eyes sagging and red, her thick auburn hair sweaty and matted against her forehead. She smiled at me.

"It must be so hard, seeing Dad like that every day," she said.

"Honestly, I don't think about it much," I said, "I mostly go from one fire to the next."

She chortled into her glass, and it echoed, rich and deep.

"I was surprised to learn that women in the church used to give blessings for the sick," I said, "I didn't know that."

"I haven't gotten that far yet, I guess," Bekah said.

"Later on in the book, it talks about how they ended it. In 1936 they just sent a letter to the General Relief Society. It wasn't the result of a revelation, or anything. It didn't even come directly from the prophet. One day, they just told them to stop. One day in 1936. I wonder if Grandma remembered it. I wish I could ask her."

Bekah nodded, and held the glass out in front of her. She did not look upset, but I noticed color draining from her face.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

"I...I...Me and Jared had a fight," she said.

"About the church?"

She shook her head as she drained her glass, reaching for her purse.

"No. About us."

Bekah doesn't usually talk about Jared. Surprised, I stood tongue tied as I considered an appropriate response. She had never said to me that she was not happy, and yet, when you watch the years drain a vibrant woman, when you remember someone pulsating with life and you no longer see this person, you don't have to be told.

"I think I'm losing my mind," Bekah said, "I went to the store, and I just stood there and stared at the shelves. For hours, I guess. I just barely got home when you called...I'm worn out. I just don't know if I can burn both ends of the stick anymore."

My mind summoned a memory from Thanksgiving. A subtle thing, really. Taryn had started complaining that she couldn't peel the potatoes with the peeler. Mom had taught us to use the knife, she said, and that was all she knew to work with. Jared had left his large hunting knife next to his keys. I don't remember where he went to, probably out with Dad to fix something. Bekah handed it to Taryn without a thought. When the men returned, Jared pulled Bekah aside and whispered to her. She traded Taryn with the dull steak knife Taryn had already given up on before she tried the peeler, and Bekah returned the good knife to its place next to the keys. She wouldn't look any of us in the eye.

"I know Jared can be kind of controlling," I said.

"He's a good provider," Bekah said.

"You say that like a robot."

"I know."

I reached out to squeeze her hand. I wanted her to talk, but I sensed the conversation draining her of what little resolve she had left.

"I better go," she said, "He may still be waiting up. I don't know what I'm going to do about that presentation in the morning. I'll have to ask to reschedule."

“Tell them about Dad,” I said, “That should get you out of it.”

“Good ole, nutty Dad. We can count on him.”

“Thank you for coming, Bekah. You are my hero, as usual.”

I walked Bekah to her van, and as the headlights pulled away from me, as I felt the darkness overcome me, my breath seized, and my hands shook, and I leaned against the door, clutching my chest, wishing for some way to collect the air all around me and force it in. I gasped and squirmed. Then, the fear eased and slinked away into the field.

Inside, I behaved and felt normal. I checked the bedrooms for bodies before returning to the front room, determining that the pain behind my eyes made it too late to read. Under the cast of the lamp’s glow, I stood in the darkness and studied the row of portraits on the mantle, four girls, each eight years of age, all smiling beneath the glory of a white gown, white ribbons sailing in their hair beneath tufts of baby’s breath, (Mom’s final touch). I studied my own portrait, the cropped crown of tight curls, the green innocence of my eyes, the small hands loosely clutching my newly purchased scriptures inscribed with my name. Cassandra Mae Snow.

My father smiled as I stepped down into the baptismal font, the warm water pressing over me like a swathed blanket. Dressed in white, he had stolen the armor of an angel, but this was a pleasant surprise, as though there rested more unexpected good in him I had yet to know. How do you explain how the Holy Ghost feels? Is it the crack of piercing sunlight from the window before you take your last unsaved breath? Is it the warm wash below the water that rushes calm over thoughts of drowning, of never rising up? Is it the new breath you take as you part streaming water and hair from your eyes, anxious to see what the world looks like without sin?

OLIVIA

May 12

Megan walked stiffly from the church door to the car, though I wrongly assumed she walked awkwardly in her new heels, and I simply hadn't noticed the new gait yet. She sat in the passenger's seat, and said nothing as I pulled the car out. Her enthusiasm and incessant chatter about her mission had become so commonplace, I had her prattling fixated as background noise for my life. Alarmed at the silence, I divided my attention between the road and her face, carefully noting her wide eyes and faraway expression.

"How did it go? What's wrong?" I said.

"I don't feel like shopping for dresses," she said.

"Why? What happened?"

For the life of me, I couldn't imagine what our stake president would say to put her in such a mood. They arranged the meeting to prepare Megan for what to expect at the Missionary Training Center, still three months away, and I imagined encouragement and perhaps a few pointers for coping with the sure difficulties of mission life in Guatemala. The meeting lasted only twenty minutes.

"He said I was probably too attractive to go on a mission," she said, "He thought they would probably put me in the office. He said it could be trouble for the elder missionaries, and investigators. It was like he was almost mad at me."

"What? That's ridiculous!"

"I guess I'll just make trouble because I'm *so attractive*," she said.

"Well, he probably just means you should be careful," I said, "You know, make sure you dress modestly..."

“So you’re taking his side?”

“No, no. He should never have said that to you. That was highly inappropriate. I’m really angry about it,” I said.

“Is he trying to say I should just get married? What am I doing, Mom? *What am I doing?*”

“You’re going on a mission, Megan! You are going on a mission for the Lord. You and Jeff, and then you’re coming home and living happily ever after. You prayed about it. You know God wants you in Guatemala, and you’re going, whether you are beautiful or not.”

Megan laughed.

“Do you have any idea how ridiculous that sounds?” she asked.

Inside the mall, Megan held dresses away from her at eye level, frowning. I studied her as though I watched behind glass, entranced with her large, doe eyes scanning the fabrics, her thick brown hair tucked evenly over her shoulders. My twenty-one year old daughter, too beautiful to go on a mission? I flittered between outrage and flattery, imagining both calling the stake president to complain, and also repeating the story to my sisters while we tucked watermelon seeds in the ground in a few weeks. Unbelievable.

How proud I was of the two and a half years of college she had behind her, and the passion she felt, the willingness she showed for serving in the field. My heart gloried in it. The field was white and ready to harvest, and my daughter would be out in the world, thrusting her sickle. This is what I had committed myself for, to bring up children in the true and everlasting covenant, children who hungered and thirsted after truth and righteousness. I could only hope for as much with the other three. James, eighteen, did not seem to feel the same connection to the church that Megan had, but there was still time. Another year before

he would be mission age, and no question he had a good soul. And Emily, now twelve, just entering Young Women's, reminded me a lot of Megan at that age, diligently memorizing her articles of faith before supper on Sundays, reciting them to me as I pulled rolls from the oven. And it was a bit soon to tell with Avery, still only six, but there was no question she liked church, never put up a fuss about going, and she often asked me about Jesus, a good sign.

Megan flung dresses at me as though punishing me for dragging her shopping in a bad mood. I held my arms out and allowed them to build into a soft heap.

"What about this one?" she asked me.

She held up a deep red dress, silk, casually cut with square sleeves, breast pockets, and sable buttons lining the center from chest to hem.

"Beautiful," I said.

"Well, *that's* not the look we're going for."

"Oh, Megan. Just get what you like. Forget about him," I said.

She rolled her eyes and tossed the red dress atop the pile, plus two others. Then, the phone rang.

I would have allowed the call to go to voicemail, my arms and the purse both buried in clothes but I had one of my "grace moments" which is what I started calling them fourteen years ago, after I saved five year old James from cracking his skull on a concrete slab when he fell off the side of a swing set at the park. Moments before it happened, an urge, almost like a tickle in my brain, moved me to walk closer beneath where he stood leaning against the wooden post at the top of the playset. A large boy with dark hair, at least two years older than James, barreled past him and knocked him from his place at the monkey bar opening. I

snatched out and caught him, the two of us crashing together into the pavement. I can't fully explain the grace moments or how they work but I would call it a voice both outside and inside myself, always connected but better channeled in certain moments that appear innocent to my five natural senses. I have had at least one with all four of my children, and I had one the day at the mall when the phone rang in the unattainable purse.

"I need to get it," I told Megan, and transferred the mound of dresses to a chair near the dressing room. She grabbed a few from the top and disappeared around the corner. I managed to open the phone on the last ring.

"Olivia? It's Cassie."

"I had a feeling it was you," I said.

"Bekah is at Black Rock," she said, "She called me to come, but Garrett hasn't come home yet, and I'm stuck here with Dad and the kids."

"I'm on my way," I said, "I have to take care of some things, but I'm on my way. Call and tell her."

"I'll try. You know how the service is at Lake Point," she said.

"Do you know what's wrong?" I asked.

"I...I think I do. I'm not sure, but I think..."

"What?"

"I don't know. She didn't say. She was just really upset, Olivia."

"I'm coming, I'm coming."

I found Megan's feet in the eighteen-inch gap under the dressing room stall, and slid a credit card under the door.

"I have to go. Bekah has an emergency. Get what you need. You can justify it later."

“Sweet!”

This adolescent response evoked relief instead of panic, as she sounded cheered up and I could turn my attention away from my eldest daughter and onto my sister. In the car, I called James, who thankfully had come home straight after his shift at the pizzeria. I told him to put Emily in charge of Avery while he drove the Forerunner to the mall to pick up Megan after she called. Then I called Mike, to see if his case would go late, and to let him know my whereabouts.

“She’s at Black Rock,” I told him.

“Yes?”

“Black Rock, Mike. Where were you the last twenty years? If we didn’t plan a special trip, and somebody’s at Black Rock, something is really wrong.”

“But you don’t even know what it is,” he said.

“I don’t have to know what it is. She’s my sister.”

“Right. Okay, I will make sure Emily and Avery get their homework done, then.”

He sounded far away. Distracted by a case. He was impossible to engage in that mode. A lawyer’s wife needs an extra helping of patience. He sounded this way when he read the Sunday paper as I tried to tell him about my stress as Young Women’s president. Pretending to care, that is, and not caring quite enough to give a decent performance. The last five years he had spiraled deep into this place in his head, disengaged from all of us, wrapped up in his true thoughts as though hearing them might entice us to steal them away. He did not invest in our children’s spiritual growth anymore, hadn’t for years. I gave up on penetrating his emotional cocoon. So many nights I begged him to talk to me, but he said it was fine, everything was fine. Everything was so, so, so fine. And I felt bloated and sick with fine. I

wanted to tell him to stop being fine or take up acting lessons. But I said none of this on the phone in the car, because in that moment, I knew Bekah needed me, and Bekah would tell me her problems, and I could hear them, and know and remember that people have problems in this world, and some even speak of them, and somewhere in the midst of all that I would forget myself.

Bekah's phone went straight to voicemail, no doubt due to the patchy service at Lake Point. I tried again, hoping for a voice to talk to, not wanting to be alone. It was impossible to drive to Black Rock without thinking of all those trips down the old highway to that hill of limestone. The rock sat just a few miles from our childhood home, garnishing the shore of the Great Salt Lake. Mother first took us there the day of Grandmother's funeral, when I was six, and she told us how Brigham Young had spotted it three days after settling the valley. After that first trip, the rock evolved into our sacred space, a place of reflection, of solitude, and of mourning.

We climbed Black Rock in times of turmoil, in times of joy. A steep climb, certainly, but a sure path zigzagged to the top, perhaps a hundred feet up. We would sit on the flat plateau, toss over pieces of flat, black slate, nearly as shiny as flint. A few cement posts had been bored into the top, though we didn't what they were used for or who had put them there. We climbed the day before our weddings. Each of us wrote a wish for the bride on a small square of blue satin, which we tucked into a satchel and pinned in the underskirt of the gown. On my wedding day, the faint smell of brinish salt water wafted in that moment before I turned the skirts down. I knew Taryn still kept her satchel in the bottom of her dresser drawer, though she was no longer married. Perhaps it was still a good memory for her. The four of us climbed the rock together the day Bekah discovered herself pregnant with Isabelle,

and each of us ventured a revelation for the unborn. I said it would be a girl, because I had dreamt it. Mother said the baby would be able to sing, and Cassie said the baby would not be able to sing, explaining that this ensured that one of the predictions would be right. Taryn, sixteen at the time, predicted the baby would marry in the temple.

I wondered what Taryn would say about that today.

Although our official gathering place for milestones, Black Rock had served as a haven as well. Mother took us the day our baby brother Joseph died. Eight years old, I watched the wind yank Mother's hair as she released a fistful of red rose petals she had plucked from the coffin spread. Her hair tossed, fine and richly brown and free of gray then. The petals rained over the cliff of rock and onto the shore below. Some of them drifted onto the sand; a few slipped onto the water. She turned to me, her green eyes dead and buried, and told me to do the same. I sobbed as my sweaty hand opened, some of the petals clinging to the moisture on my palm, though I held it flat in the air. Bekah, only six, cried at the sight of my tears, and flung the petals as though glad to be rid of them. Cassie, only two, put a few in her mouth, and Mother had to help her toss them into the lake. She cried when she realized she had no more petals. Mother held her, and said nothing. We climbed down, and rode home in silence, the memory of waving, floating petals distilling our souls. He had lived only four days.

And there were other times, some too sad to mention, when we climbed that monstrous rock and held each other, and cried each other's tears. I had stood looking out over the lake only two weeks before, after our mother's funeral dinner had ended and the four of us climbed, barefoot and skirts, remembering her soft voice, her key lime pie, her crazy cotton dresses she wore everywhere. Somewhere on that rock, between the translucent sky

and the gentle waves of the Great Salt Lake, we held her still, I think, touching her as we drifted across time, remembering only that which kept her there, suspended in a moment.

I searched the ridgeline as Black Rock came into view on the old highway. I still couldn't see Bekah from the ground when I began the climb, but her van rested near the rock. As I neared the top, I hollered to her.

"Bekah, Bekah."

"I'm here," her voice called. She felt far away.

I mounted the ridgeline at last, and spotted her across the plateau, her figure wound into a ball, her back to me, her thick hair flying. I walked across the top, and stood beside her until she turned to notice me. She studied my face.

"I thought Cassie was coming," she said, and turned back to the water.

No longer a trusted confidant, I crouched beside her and twisted my bare feet into lotus pose, put my hands on my knees, and breathed deeply. The air stunk.

"Do you know what I was just thinking about?" I said. "I was thinking of that piece of satin we all wrote on for my wedding day. I still have mine. Mom wished that we would never go to bed angry. You wished that Mike would take me on a date every week. Cassie wished that I would get an automatic dishwasher. I think that was because that's all I talked about the week before. Remember, the landlord promised us one, and it fell through? And do you know what Taryn wished for? That I wouldn't get fat having babies!"

"Yeah, she wrote that on mine, too," Bekah said.

"How unoriginal," I said.

"I know."

Bekah propped her elbows on her knees, laced her fingers together and placed her face on her hands. Her weight made it impossible for her to sit properly, her thick legs butterflyed out in an awkward angle from her hips. My back hurt simply looking at her.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

The question, of course, a formality, Bekah set her eyes on the horizon and bit her top lip.

“No. But I don’t know how you would react if I told you,” she said.

“Try me,” I said.

Bekah stared into my face, and opened her mouth. Oddly, I had another grace moment, though I had no idea how to interpret it. There was no impending fall, no message, no ringing phone or doorbell, just Bekah about to speak, and a part of me wanted to stop her.

“I don’t know anymore if the church is true.”

This hung in the air a few moments.

“Okay,” I said slowly, “When you say, ‘I don’t know if the church is true’ you mean...”

“I mean, I don’t know if Joseph Smith was a prophet. I don’t know if everything he said came from God the way he said it did.”

“Bekah.”

“Yes.”

“Bekah.”

“What?”

“Of all the people I know, you are someone who has a testimony. I’ve seen it. I’ve heard it. You have a testimony,” I said.

“What if you’re wrong?”

“I’m not.”

“Olivia, listen to yourself. How can you know what I know better than me?”

I stood up, and paced, feeling the bite of loose pebbles in the soles of my bare feet. The brinish smell from the lake thickened around me, and I breathed through my mouth. The orange sunset burned into the horizon, lighting the water into rippling flames.

“What about the cat?” I asked.

“Creamer.”

“Yes, Creamer. He came home with a broken leg, and Dad was going to put him out of his misery. You sat over that cat for half a day, and prayed and prayed. We all knew it was a miracle. Even the vet said...”

“I know.”

“And Mother believed in you.”

“I know.”

“She believed so much that when Taryn was born...When Taryn was born...”

I couldn’t finish. It felt like speaking the sacred aloud. We rarely spoke of it. Only when Mother brought it up. I retracted into the twelve-year-old girl holding my mother’s sweaty, brown hair, thick and wet in my hands like a mop. Her large, protruding forehead had always been the most prominent feature of her face, and her forehead is what I remember, shining, my own private moon to the horror. She moaned, her green eyes searching the ceiling, her body writhing as though her spirit anticipated leaping out of the shell and floating up through the spackling. *Where is he? Where is he? Where is he?* She asked us over and over. And we said he wasn’t back yet, we said he was at the seed store, we

said we didn't know. We said we didn't know again, and we cried. She said, *It can't be like Joseph. It just can't be like Joseph again.* And we cried harder, and Bekah and I took turns rocking Cassie, who screamed wildly, in Grandmother's chair. And then Taryn came, much to everyone's terror, she burst through that deep vessel through which we had all come. And we couldn't help knowing it, we couldn't look away, we could only rush forward and partake of creation, pull the tiny blue girl from the sacredness, and understand all that was our mother, and revere her power.

"I know," Bekah said, "I know."

"I don't understand," I said.

Bekah's eyes trailed upwards. Seagulls swooped close overhead, cawing, scouting for leftover food. I ducked.

"Did you read the book?" Bekah asked.

"What book?"

"Taryn's book."

"Oh, that book? That's what this is about?"

Bekah peeled her legs from beneath her, and leaned back onto her hands. She tilted her head back to gaze at the darkening sky, blinking fast, her brown eyes liquefying, her full lips pursed into white, corpse-like pallor. I knelt beside her and squeezed her flexed arm beneath her fleece jacket, firm and taut, throttling a bit. Two tears slipped across the sides of her face and disappeared into her hair.

"I prayed about it, Olivia. There was so much that I had never thought about before. It was like I had a little goblin that I kept in the basement. And as long as I kept the door locked, I didn't have to think about him. Once in a while, I could hear him scratching, or

whimpering, or rattling stuff around, but as long as I kept the door locked, he stayed in the basement. I could pretend he wasn't there."

She turned at me sharply, wide eyed, as though expecting me to understand her ramblings. I squeezed her arm again and settled beside her.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean, I finally opened the basement door. And do you know what? As scary as it was, there was a part of me that actually felt relieved... I didn't think the book would get to me. I thought it was just another one of Taryn's tirades. And I thought we would let her say her piece, and then we would all ignore her and go on with our lives," she said.

"It is. It was. We will," I said.

Bekah shook her head slowly from side to side, swiping her hand over her eyes a few times, battling the wind for a strand of thick, auburn hair.

"I think I was finally tired enough to listen," she said, "My life has been so wrong for such a long time. I have killed too much of myself, and I have allowed too much of myself to be killed."

I pulled a hair elastic from my jacket pocket and handed it to her. She gathered her hair behind her and threaded a ponytail, studying my face, waiting for a reaction. I had no idea how to interpret these musings.

"Why don't you tell me what it was in the book that bothered you?" I asked.

"Bothered me?" she asked, and she looked back at the sky, "I was inspired! Why do we have a Mother in Heaven if we can't think of Her, or pray to Her, or talk of Her? For once, I let myself wonder about that. I pictured Her beside the Father. And I started to yearn for Her motherly love. I understood finally, just how long I had ignored Her, and how by

doing so, I had ignored myself. I remember getting in the shower, Olivia, and looking over my body like I wasn't in it at all. It was surreal, acknowledging my femaleness, feeling Her all around me, and understanding finally, *finally* what had been missing. I can't remember the last time I felt the Spirit so strong."

"Well, but Bekah, of course it's all right for you to feel that way!"

Bekah opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again, choosing instead to scan her eyes across the lake, her dark eyelids easing up and down with fatigue.

"I'm glad you think so," she said, "I feel like I need all my sisters right now. And do you know who else I can't get out of my mind? Carolina."

"Carolina?"

Carolina Shepherd, our cousin, dated my husband for six months while I was still in high school. Of all my cousins growing up, she had been my favorite by far. She played music full blast when she babysat us, and once she demonstrated a French kiss on Bekah's stuffed poodle, which had a pink, felt tongue. She also had the uncanny ability to convince anyone to stop crying, and one time she used her craft to tell my father that she always saw me sleeping in class, and later that day he told me he would do the morning chores from then on. Unsurprisingly, she became a therapist. She stopped dating Mike because she wanted him to go on a mission, but when he returned from his mission, he began dating me. Tensions soared for about four weeks until she began dating Joshua Shepherd, at the time a class clown of sorts, and later, a radio DJ. I never did decide if I felt triumphant for winning Mike, or curious whether Josh had been the better catch. I always have to scold myself for noticing if she looks heavier than the time I saw her last.

“Yes, do you remember how ostracized she was at the family reunion?” Bekah asked, “And the way Aunt Judith just sat by her the whole time with that defensive look on her face. I judged Carolina so terribly, Olivia. I feel just awful.”

Honestly, I had not noticed her being ostracized. I mostly remembered the extra twenty or so pounds she had acquired since last year. But of course, it had to be awkward for her. She had resigned from the church sometime during the year, and according to the family rumor mill, Josh didn’t exactly support the decision. Some people felt her career had finally gone to her head. I didn’t picture Carolina that way, and I didn’t try to explain it to myself other than to feel sorry for her because it could not be easy rejecting the truth.

“Yes, I feel sorry for her, too,” I said.

Bekah stood, and placed her hands on her lower back to stretch. I stood with her, and we began the descent off the rock to the two lonely vehicles waiting below, my green Ford Taurus, and her red Dodge Caravan. We often found ourselves alone when we came here, but I felt overly aware of our seclusion, melding into the sky, the rock, the lake. The gulls cried from the shore with the same desolate ache I felt inside. We had left our own world, and entered this world with the gulls, and here I found a simple consciousness of the present, and the continual seeking in each moment for the next fallen crumb.

We lingered in front of her van door. She pulled the keys from her pocket and stood with her alligator keychain pressed in her hand.

“What will happen to you, Bekah, if you don’t believe?” I asked her, “I can’t even imagine my life without the church.”

“Neither can I,” she said.

Tears formed in her dark eyes and she blinked and let out a slow breath, brushing the tears with the side of her hand.

“Then...?”

I shook my head the way I had when we were kids, when I helped her with algebra. I remember the harsh way her thick brows knitted together, she adding the numbers wrong, and me trying to correct it before it went on even further.

“I don’t know where I’m at now,” she said, “I don’t know what’s going to happen. I’m really confused about everything. It’s like I came face to face with myself, and now I just can’t stop going back to the mirror. But I don’t know what that means, really. What that translates to in my life.”

I reached up and hugged her, squeezing her warm, firm shoulders, her sobs falling into my arms in waves.

“Just pray about it, Bekah. Don’t do anything rash. Just pray,” I said.

Inside the car driving home, I sat stiffly and studied the road, trying to ignore the hollowness drumming in my stomach. I thought of Bekah, fifteen years old, on the day of her patriarchal blessing. She walked through the front door, her thick hair pulled into a knot at the nape of her neck, a long, cream dress hugging her full figure, all accessories to that ethereal smile. We all felt the Spirit. Dad said an extra long prayer over dinner, and Mother smiled at the green beans, and Bekah’s eyes shone so bright I could have seen my reflection in them from across the table. We all wanted to be her, to know what she knew, to feel what she felt, to touch what she had touched.

Part of me buried the nagging fear that the death of Bekah’s truth would be the undoing of us all, that I would never be able to pick up the slack by myself, that our lives

would disentwine and my precious sisters would fly away like birds. But there was something else, too, though I didn't know why it troubled me more. The ethereal smile. I had not seen it in a very long time. The absence of her smile, the ghost of joy, hunted me with the truth.

TARYN*June 2*

“*Shit!*”

I flipped the sheet off me so hard, it slapped Seth in the face and he hissed awake.

“It’s 9:30!”

My cut-off shorts were lying next to the bed, pooled into two rumpled holes as though last night I had melted out of them and into the floor. I pitched my nightshirt into the air and slipped the shorts on, threading arms through bra straps and groping my black Sturgis t-shirt back over my head. I took two drunken steps and tripped over my blue wedge sandals as I climbed into them. Seth plopped my orange pillow over his face before a final glance, only half interested in my half naked body.

“I should have been there two hours ago. I haven’t even picked up the seeds yet. I can hear Olivia already. ‘Glad you could make it, Taryn,’”

“I don’t get it,” Seth moaned from behind the pillow, “If the crops don’t make any money, why bother? Your dad doesn’t care either way.”

“Because,” I said, “We decided we didn’t want the field to die, too. At least, not this year. It’s tradition. Besides. We’re going to talk about the book.”

Seth peeked out from the corner of the orange pillowcase.

“Oh yeah, I forgot,” he said, “The church history book. That ought to go over well.”

“Shut up,” I said.

Seth’s arms extended out in a morning stretch from beneath his pillow head.

“Why do you care what they think, anyway?”

“Why do I care what *you* think?”

“Because,” he said, and he rose up and grabbed me before I could jump away, damn shoes, and I elbowed him in the gut to break free, and I stumbled to the door, without even stopping to watch him recover. I plucked my green leather purse from a kitchen chair.

“I’ll be back,” I said.

“I know you will,” he yelled after me, and I shut the apartment door behind me with a tiny smile.

I climbed down the three flights of stairs and rushed out to the tin carport that ornamentally protected my white Prius.

“*Shit!*”

Seth’s black portfolio bag leaned against the backseat, the top edge resting onto the window. I tried the door to his turquoise Ford. Locked. Did he say he planned on sketching today? A small voice said he sketched *every* Saturday, but I did not find that small voice particularly useful, and considered it quite rude that it did not take into consideration current events. Three flights, and I still didn’t have the seeds. Leaving the portfolio in the carport seemed the greater sin than taking it, so I glanced at it in the rearview, checking it like I would a child, and turned the ignition. Sorry, Seth. Maybe you could take a day off from art, I imagined telling him when he called. Maybe you could take a day off from breathing, I imagined him saying back.

He called as I stood in the seed store, behind an old lady in navy polyester pants and a straw hat. She clutched a bag of mulch against her like she feared someone would snatch it away. She turned to peer up at me when I answered the phone. I smiled. She did not smile back.

“I know, I know,” I said, “But I was so late.”

“I wanted to finish that sketch,” he said, “But I guess I’ll just paint.”

“Paint a big one,” I said.

“A big one?”

“Yeah. You never use the big canvases. They just take up space.”

“So that’s what this is about,” he said, “Space.”

“No, this is about white canvas,” I said, “This is about vast boundaries of white nothingness.”

The lady twisted around again, but turned back before allowing me to try out my smile on her once more.

“Okay,” he said.

“Really?”

“Yeah. You’re going to be gone all day, right?”

“I’m sorry I stole your portfolio,” I said.

“I think you did it on purpose.”

Tossing the pink plastic bag of seeds across the passenger seat next to my purse, I pulled out of the nursery and headed towards I-80. The sun’s heat warmed my arms slightly through the glass of the window, promising pleasant weather for late spring. Grass in the valley lingered dull brown in color, easing into its muted shade of Kentucky blue with the stubborn reluctance desert flora liked to maintain in early June.

The act of driving to the ranch brought up old memories, resurrected my ex, Tyler, from the early grave I plotted out for him in my mind long ago. Tapping my fingers on the steering wheel to Bon Jovi, I evaded visions of my nieces spinning on the front lawn in pale

teal taffeta, me stepping carefully over the alkaline soil in white satin heels, clutching the hem of my wedding gown above the dirt, the white netting of my petticoat exposed. I distantly remember smiling. Then the joy layers itself in my mind with the subsequent grief, a mosaic of splendid bliss sharpened on the edges by months of crumbling disappointment, and the pain hacks, hacks, hacks away at the beauty of that day until the smiles are nothing but photographs.

I loved my sisters. That's why I always went back and subjected myself to this torture. Of course, my disaffection would never allow us to be as close as we once were. Mom never made it any easier for me. I couldn't even tell her I was happy with my new life, I was happy being divorced and out of the church.

"I want to be happy for you," she said, "But what about the next life? You have to consider the eternal consequences as well."

Her faith would not allow her to accept me as I was.

By the time I was born, my mother was a tired woman. That is the only version I have of her in my memory, with her hair flat, tied back, clean at best, eyes sunk into her face. She was afraid. She might complain about church, or my father, or the difficulties of farm life, but she was always rose early in the morning, attending, doing what was asked of her, enduring. And I did want to be her, though I don't believe she ever knew it.

And I met Tyler. At a single's ward dance when I was nineteen. Tall, fresh faced, a mesmerizing smile. He understood how to impress women. Attentive, flattering, he picked flowers, and he won me over when he offered to drive me to the city on his day off to buy textbooks for school. Self-sacrificing. Tyler understood the aesthetic needs of the culture. He learned early on that he didn't have to have goodness as much as he needed to project

goodness, that he simply needed to be convincing. Clues presented themselves to me during the courtship, but I hadn't the heart to pay attention. One afternoon, he brought me to his parents' house where he lived. He had just picked up his paycheck and sat down in the kitchen right away to write a check for tithing. So impressed, I would have ran off to elope with him that very day. And then his younger brother walked in the room and wanted to borrow ten bucks for gas so he could get to work the next week. Tyler told him no without a flinch.

And I noticed, too, one day, when his mother complained about her arthritis acting up in her feet and Tyler admonished her for not having more faith in his father's blessing. That really bothered me, but by that point I had drawn the envy of every girl in my ward, and Tyler, he was going places, an ambitious pre med student on full scholarship, and he had chosen me to come along for the ride. And his mother listened, convincing me for a brief time that Tyler had been right. The trouble with being chosen is that I forgot I could choose, and I continued to convince myself that I was damn lucky finding a great provider like that, and anyone I talked to would have affirmed it. We couldn't all be wrong.

Our big fight happened at the ranch, with my dad nearby, penning the sheep. We went into the chicken shed for privacy, because we had started to argue. He wanted to go east for medical school, when we had already decided he would attend school here. I didn't want to lose my family, move away where I knew no one. I had never seen him so angry, and he began to shout about priesthood authority and the head of the house, and the woman hearkening unto her husband as he hearkens unto God, and this was his decision. I started to shake violently, and foam a little in my mouth, and I said I would never go. And I suppose he believed me, because that is when it happened.

And so it was with the church, too. It had to be right, it had to be true, even though there were little things troubling me, even though a month of Sundays left me empty inside, even though God felt further away with each prayer. We couldn't all be wrong. But Tyler, he ruined all that for me, and I suppose if one good thing came out of the mess it was that, for I now possessed both halves of myself and felt a great deal of peace most of the time, when I wasn't talking religion with my family.

Despite my worries over Tyler, I had no idea I had married a man capable of raping his own wife. I don't think it even sunk in until long after the divorce. Right after he left, I scrambled out into the orchard with my purse and somehow managed to call Bekah. She found me there all bloody and she wouldn't let up, wouldn't let me go back to him. God bless her for that. I couldn't accept that I had married a man like that, because if I did, what kind of woman would that make me? And despite all my righteous choices, despite all the good I deserved, this was how I had ended up, and at the end of all that injustice, the church simply couldn't be true anymore, even though I wanted it to be. That was one thing Mom never understood. That I wanted the church to be true. It just wasn't.

I turned the familiar corner to the ranch house and parked in the field because everyone else's cars were parked in the drive. Olivia answered the door, made some comment about my being late, which I ignored, and threw my arms around Bekah. I tried not to look around. Photographs of my baptism, my seminary graduation, even a photo of myself a lone bride in front of the Salt Lake Temple, covered the room. Yet a part of me liked seeing the four of us lined up together on the shelves, all in the same place, on the same page, living the same life, even if it was a lie. I wanted to be grouped with my sisters. I never asked them to take them down now that Mom was gone.

Cassie leaned over Dad in the kitchen, wiping the table clean from lunch with a green sponge as he blotted his mouth with a paper towel and glared at her. Shaded by his tan cowboy hat, his blue eyes seeped out from under the brim, narrowed and aiming beneath the white caps of his brows, biting. Cassie's curly, sand-colored hair floated in thin strands about her head over her hassled expression. She didn't look at us as we walked in. She wiped her hands clean on the flanks of her unflattering, straight leg jeans as Dad tugged on the end of her university t-shirt.

"But I said I would get the seeds," Dad said, his tone offended.

"They're here, Dad," Cassie said, "They're already here."

Dad's Alzheimer's worsened the two months following Mom's death, and he didn't seem to appreciate Cassie in the least for putting her life on hold to watch over him. He carried on like a willful child, ordering her about, inventing missing documents or wrinkled trousers to complain about. He had always complained to Mom like that, but through the years she invented ways to cope, passively acknowledging his complaints, but essentially ignoring him to return to her roses or her quilt or her Harlequin novel. Cassie, however, leapt up at every grievance. God only knew why. The strain had to be driving Garrett out of his mind.

"Are you ready to plant, Dad?" Olivia asked him, "They're here, finally."

Dad glanced up at Olivia as though surprised anyone else existed, then looked away to dismiss her.

"Of course I'm ready," he said, "What do you girls think of your old dad?"

I walked through the front door as everyone else walked through the back. If anyone noticed, they didn't let on. I wanted to avoid the chicken shed near the back door, now

serving as a tool shed (I had only vague childhood memories that involved actual chickens.) When I saw the chicken shed, when I even thought of the chicken shed, I had to concentrate hard not to see the rusted edges of that antique band saw or the crusty, broken straps of Dad's old show saddle beneath the dirty blue plaid of the horse blanket. And I had to hum a tune to myself so my own screams wouldn't find me again.

Dad dropped a handful of seeds into his tool belt and walked to the north end of the field. He carried a large stick with his tools, lightly tapping it to the ground, and I asked Cassie if he was having trouble walking. She gave me a hard look.

"That's the healing cane," she said.

And I recalled, steadily, the long oak cane made from Joseph Smith's coffin, though I had almost forgotten the heirloom since Dad mostly hid it away.

"Why does he have that out?" I asked. Cassie let out a deep, horsy breath, agitated.

"I don't know. I can't get him to put it away."

My sisters and I walked to the south, and I could have been fifteen again, or six, or twenty, performing this ritual. We planted together so we could talk, or laugh, or gripe about the replenishing pile of watermelon seed. And Dad planted alone so he could be alone, or so he could eavesdrop unnoticed, or so he could imagine life in another place, with another wife and sons to carry his name. He never did say. Did the Alzheimer's intrude upon the solitude he felt in the north field? Did he have moments when he missed himself?

"I don't know if you can do this anymore, Cassie," Olivia said.

We knelt, each in our own row, burrowing a hole into the loose soil. I liked to feel sand sift, consistent like water falling through the cracks between my fingers, so I usually

dug with bare hands until the alkaline dried my skin to cement and forced me to put on the gloves.

“What do you mean?” Cassie asked.

“I mean, look at you Cassie,” Olivia said, “You’re exhausted.”

“It’s a gorgeous day isn’t it?” Cassie asked.

I smiled at my first seed, dotted in the palm of my hand, and leaning forward, hid my amusement with a hunk of hair.

“I don’t think there’s anything that could make this day more perfect,” Cassie said.

“Only tequila,” I said.

Bekah snickered, and Olivia shot a cool glance in my direction.

“Is that what you’re going to wear planting, Taryn?” Olivia asked me.

“Standards of modesty are a personal thing, Olivia,” I said.

“I was referring to the shoes,” she said, “And I don’t care if you guys don’t want to talk about it. We need to.”

“I think Cassie should decide when she’s had enough,” Bekah said, “I don’t think we should decide for her. She’s doing a great job. She knows we’re behind her if she wants to quit.”

I worked behind Bekah, hunched over in a cheerful yellow t-shirt, a soft cotton I wanted to touch. Olivia worked to her left, her legs neatly folded about her in one of her impressive yoga poses, gloves poised and clean, pinching seeds in gray leather.

“I think we should make the decision together,” Olivia said, “I don’t think it should be Cassie’s decision alone. He’s our father, too.”

“Yes, and three of us think things are just fine the way they are,” Bekah said.

Olivia set her trowel on the ground and folded her arms, and I stopped working, alarmed. Cassie, kneeling in the row to my right, glanced in my direction to read my face, but continued her work, more skilled at hiding her own apprehension.

“So this is the way it’s going to be now, huh?” Olivia asked.

“What do you mean?” Bekah asked her.

Dad hollered from across the field, “*Do you have the landscape rake?*” And Cassie cupped her chapped hands over her mouth to holler back, “*In the chicken shed, Dad.*” A lurch of bile rose in my throat at the mention of the chicken shed, but I swallowed, and willed the thoughts away. We watched him, waiting for assurance he would aim himself the right direction, and when he started walking, our faces fell back to each other.

“I mean, the three of you are going to gang up on me from now on,” Olivia said.

“What is up with you, Olivia?” I asked her, “You usually listen to Bekah when she’s making sense. Why are you so paranoid? Sheesh.”

Olivia turned the upper half of her body around to face me, her bottom perfectly frozen, her purple jacket evenly rippled. She held herself in this position for a long moment, during which I grew uneasy, burying my seed in a half-assed away as though the seed were a murdered bug and I was now trying to bury any evidence.

“I think you would know why better than anyone,” Olivia said.

“I would know why?” I repeated.

Cassie dropped her trowel, and it fell with a soft gush in the sand. She snatched it up as though she would be reprimanded. Bekah stopped moving completely, a still, four-legged, yellow creature.

“Why would I know?” I asked.

“Don’t sit there on the ground with that look on your face and pretend like you and Bekah haven’t been talking. You did it, okay? Is that what you’re waiting for me to say? You finally got to her,” Olivia said.

Her meaning the sister between us, I gathered, by the jut of Olivia’s chin. Bekah picked up an envelope of seeds with a stiff arm, and looked up into my face, the whites of her eyes gleaming, watchful like a cat.

“What is she talking about?” I asked Bekah, who turned away and brushed sand absently down the thighs of her jeans.

“The book, Taryn,” Olivia said, “Isn’t that what you wanted? For all of us to get together and talk about the book? Well, we’re here. Talk.”

The book. The anticipation of this morning had completely left me, or maybe it had never left at all, but I had believed I held this topic of discussion safely in my pocket, tucked and waiting for me to pull it out and brush the dust from it myself, not discover blindly that it had escaped and run naked in the field, screaming. And the news of Bekah’s disaffection contributed to this surprise attack with emotions that fired at will. Bekah possessed the faith to walk on water, if she wished, and somehow, through some miraculous and inexplicable portal, she had fallen into the same disappointing world I inhabited. I wanted to throw a cloak around her cold, shaking limbs and rejoice in the company, and I also wanted to put my hands beneath her and shove her back up into that ridiculous place with all the answers. You don’t want to come down here, honey. You’re too...pleasant.

“Well, I didn’t want it to be like this,” I said, and I worked fast now, as though the seeds might shrivel in the sun if they didn’t get buried soon, “I mean, I wanted to talk, but I thought it would be like all our other conversations.”

“Just stop it, Taryn,” Olivia said, “You know what you were trying to do.”

“Wait a minute,” I said, “You’re doing just what Mom did. You’re taking all this historical evidence, *historical facts*, Olivia, and you’re putting it all on me, like it’s *my* fault the church isn’t all it claims to be.”

“How can you know what’s true, Taryn? You weren’t there.”

“Joseph Smith married other men’s wives in secret,” I said, “Six times, Olivia. Six! And I’m just expected to conjure up enough doubt in my head to keep the fairy tale alive?”

“It isn’t the church’s fault you were hurt, Taryn.”

I stopped, a pile of sand in one hand, the pebble of a seed pinched in the fingers of the other. The sand sifted through my left hand until it disappeared, only a few small drops of sand remnant on my palm, the seed hard and unbreakable in my right. Combustion sparked within me, and I knew I had been lit, and that it would be best to disengage, to smother the flames of rage before they claimed my tongue.

“Stop it, Olivia,” Cassie said, “We can discuss the church on its own merits without bringing personal stuff into it.”

“So that’s the side you fall on, then. Huh, Cassie?” Olivia asked.

I didn’t see my sisters as I stared at my hands. I stopped reading their faces or listening for clues to their thoughts in their voices. I wanted the seed to break between my fingers and I grew more intent, and more angry that it remained whole.

“There are no sides. There is only us,” Cassie said.

“Anyway, we can’t discuss anything when she’s shouting,” Olivia said.

I jumped to my feet and threw the seed as hard as I could to the ground. It landed. It did not bounce.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, and my voice was calm, innocuous. My voice was yogurt in the morning. My voice was the Table of Contents on the first page of Better Homes and Gardens. My voice was a bottle of multivitamins on the shelf in a pine-paneled cupboard.

“You don’t have the slightest idea what I went through, or who I blame for it,” I said.

“You’re right, I don’t,” Olivia said.

“Shut up! Have you ever had someone look you in the eye—someone who is supposed to be a man of God—and tell you that you need to forgive the person who has brutalized you? Do you know how it feels to have your rapist husband be granted forgiveness in a thirty-minute meeting? Because if you did, you might go looking for answers, too.”

Silence followed, my emotions swarming around my head like a colony of disturbed bees. Olivia bit her lip and looked at the ground. Bekah and Cassie sat dumb and staring, waiting for the rest of my performance. I sank into myself, and knelt back to the ground, then picked up my trowel, watched myself start the next hole.

“But none of that means the church isn’t true. The Lord’s servants aren’t perfect,” Olivia said.

I flung my trowel to the south side of the field, hard. It landed on a rocky section of soil and made a satisfying plink sound, and bounced. I marched.

“Taryn, come back,” Cassie called behind me, “We didn’t even talk about the book.”

“Yes, we did,” I shouted back.

As I passed the chicken shed, Dad appeared, landscape rake in one hand, cane in the other. It had been nine years since that night, and still the third image I saw after the rusted blade and the saddle is the narrow view of my father’s face through the crack in the shed

door, chiseled white cheeks bleached blue in the moonlight, a dead black gaze. And all these years, I had not known whether I had imagined it or not, never brought it up, never asked him.

His expression startled me so, my heart began to pound, and somehow, though unspoken, he knew my thoughts, and I knew that he had stood outside the chicken shed that night, and found Tyler and me, and had walked away.

“Why didn’t you stop him?” I wanted to ask, then and there, take the landscape rake and the cane from his hands so he would look at me, tranquilize every animal and oil every squeaking nail for a two-mile radius so he would hear me, and ask him, *“Why?”* But that conversation should have happened years ago, when he could have answered. He had sat there, at that kitchen table while my mother, not yet knowing the full story and who wouldn’t know for a long time, heckled me about the divorce, about commitment, about my future, and he didn’t say one word, though he looked me in the eye. And I convinced myself then that I had imagined him there, that he could have been some psychological coping mechanism of mine, that I willed his image there to save me, that he hadn’t actually left me there beneath Tyler, that surely he would have spoken up for me if he had seen. And yet, with all my not asking, and with all his not speaking, still both of us knew. I hated him, but even more, I envied him, walking into the sun, no longer accountable for his thoughts.

Panting to catch up, Bekah found me in the driveway, her scalp ringed with sweat. She grasped my arm with a sweaty palm.

“Taryn, come back,” she said, “There are so many exciting things we need to talk about. I was touched, Taryn. The book touched me. I had a spiritual experience.”

I cried openly, my chest aching and heaving as I sucked myself back in.

“I can’t be here anymore,” I told her, “It’s too hard to be here. I can’t look at his face anymore, or I’ll go crazy.”

“Who? Dad?”

I nodded and pulled her to me, the feel of her hair beneath my arm a comfort, and yet a wall erected inside me, as though I hadn’t the right to touch her at all. She didn’t know. She didn’t know. She didn’t know.

“Okay. I get it,” she said, “It’s alright. I’ll ride home with Olivia. It’s fine. Just go home.”

I hugged her again and whimpered, overtly aware and bolstered by her trust in me.

I drove, music off, air low. I tapped the steering wheel with my fingers, restless. I listened to the sound of my own cough. Mostly, I focused on not thinking, of turning off the ability to feel and becoming an organism capable of functioning, of aspiring and oxidizing, and most importantly, capable of appearing human.

Inside our apartment, Seth sat on the bar stool with his back to me as he stroked the canvas, up to his elbows in paint, his long, uneven hair veiling his sharp face. Tall, lanky, arms like steel bridges and the green eyes of a teenager. He thought of us the same: Twenty-seven, only three years younger than I at thirty. But I knew better. I knew I was a hundred years older than Seth. And sometimes he caught a glimpse of that old woman, gazing up at him in the heat of the moment, the soul of a crone, and the fear flickered in him and vanished, and he would never admit it, but in those moments he fell deep into my terror and crawled out again.

Seth wheeled the stool aside to reveal his work. I nearly fell over because the painting was of me, and he never painted me. He always started with me and morphed me into a child

or a monk or a tree. But this was me, eyes open, kneeling in the watermelon patch at the ranch, blue shorts and a white tank top, bare feet, my head angled towards the ground, my hands clasped together in the erect fingers of prayer, with the sky swirling behind me in navy and purple and red.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

“I’m praying,” I said, “Why am I praying?”

“You’re praying to a watermelon. What do you think?”

“Why am I praying?” I asked again.

“I know you don’t pray, Taryn.”

Seth stood, flinched, put an arm around my shoulders, squeezing me towards him.

“How do you know I don’t pray?”

“Well, do you?”

“No.”

BEKAH

June 2

We didn't need Taryn to finish the planting. With three of us working, (four if you counted Dad) the field would lay quilted with tiny, dirt mounds, all impregnated with watermelon seed within an hour. Still, her absence troubled me. For almost a decade we had shut our ears to her, and now that we finally pulled the cotton out, Olivia had dredged up the past and driven her away. Perhaps on purpose. You never can tell with Olivia. She hides the truth even from herself. I knew that better than anyone because that is how I dealt with the world up until the night Cassie and I reburied the drip line in the field.

Cassie had laid all her doubts, all her questions, out for me to examine, as though laying out dresses for a dance, wanting input to find the one that fit best. And it occurred to me then, quiet and deep, as we shoveled in the dark, that Cassie had always been in touch with her doubts, had always known herself best as she stepped away from sentiment, smiling with appreciation as we talked of the Spirit, or our miracles, or our dreams, but never sharing her own. We felt sorry for her, and we loved her despite her spiritual handicap, or maybe because of it.

I walked back into the field, and settled between my other two sisters. Olivia sat cross-legged, a delicate, blond, ballerina, plucking tiny sprouts of weed from the soil like pulling hair from a dinner plate, holding them out for inspection and dropping them with a twist of her gloved fingers. She glanced at me over the top of her sunglasses, her green eyes darting out all ablaze.

"I didn't mean to make her mad," Olivia said, "Taryn has a temper."

"I know," I said, even though I didn't.

“She didn’t leave the church until the marriage went bad,” Olivia said, “I blame Tyler for what happened to my sister. I can’t believe I ever liked him.”

“We all liked him,” Cassie said.

And we did. He ran a hardware store with his father, attended school full time, and he had served two years in Ecuador for the church. He gave flowers to Mom on their first date, and although we laughed at that a little, I think all of us were a bit smitten by his gesture. Tall, wide blue eyes and gorgeous teeth, Mom started referring to him as “Prince Charming” shortly before their engagement. There was something about him, though, that never set right with me. The way he always seemed to need the undivided attention of whoever he found himself with began to trouble me more after the wedding. He would interrupt my reading just to tell me a joke, or ask me questions about nothing really, probing and staring and smiling until finally I smiled back, and then he seemed satisfied and moved on to someone else. His vanity crippled his personality, in my opinion, though I did not know how black his heart truly was until the night Taryn called. I woke straight from a dream of swimming to her ragged, shaking breath on the other line, no words came from her as I raced to the van, and drove the painstaking thirty minutes to the ranch. I found her dead-faced in the orchard, a mess of torn, bloody slacks and white limbs, waiting with the moon, too afraid to walk inside and tell Mom about “Prince Charming.”

“I like Seth much better,” Olivia said.

“You do?” I asked.

“Yeah, I do. What? Does that surprise you?”

Actually, yes. Seth had nothing to do with the church, and he once told Olivia off for trying to set him up with the missionaries. The polar opposite of Tyler, Seth was neither

especially good looking nor outgoing. He had a sharp, pale, brooding face, skinny arms and legs, and he often disappeared into his sketchpad when Taryn brought him around to socialize with the family. Although not really pleasant, he rarely acted rude and his somewhat dull personality gave him a refreshing air of honesty that we all responded well to. The sisters, that is, I don't know if Mom or Dad ever warmed up to him.

"Well, he's not exactly church material," I said, and noticed my hands cramping. I stopped digging and rubbed my palms with my thumbs, one, then the other.

"No," Olivia said, "He isn't church material at all. But he makes Taryn happy. That should count for something, right?"

"Right," Cassie said.

We settled into a rhythm, moving down the aisle almost in unison, as though it would be rude for one of us to finish before anyone else. The sun seemed to move higher every second, and I roasted, and thought maybe the drama for the day had been put to rest with the seeds. Then Cassie spoke.

"We could talk about the book," she said.

"What for?" Olivia asked, "Taryn's not here."

"I don't know," Cassie said.

Cassie has always had this way about her. She often says things she doesn't intend to be interpreted literally, and she relies on us to use our sister powers to translate her message correctly. "I don't know" in Cassie tongue meant more of a ginger dare than a lack of ready response.

Although I felt bad about Taryn leaving, and would have reversed the situation if I could, relief fluttered in her absence, as the center of trouble had shifted away from myself

and onto Taryn's past in my head. How excellent it felt to touch the sandy, ranch soil, bury my knees and toes in the cool earth, to step outside of myself and into the world. The last three days, I had lived beneath a keyhole of light as I woke and dressed Isabelle and Brayden, forgetting their questions even as I answered them, driving to work, prodding myself through each task, then home again, and into bed. I no longer fought the vague, anonymous pain that I felt in the grocery store. I no longer felt that disconnect of trouble taunting my conscience like the soft jerk on the end of a fishing line. I had finally wound the line and glimpsed his large, writhing body, and I knew after coming face to face with my lake monster, I would have to reel him in, or drop the pole.

"Do you want to talk about it, Bekah?" Olivia asked me.

I wasn't sure. So many of my thoughts piled and piled inside me. So much of me longed to be freed by a loose tongue. But to speak of new truth could only be accomplished by challenging the old, and there hung between us a distinct danger in my questions. Who would I be if I was no longer the Bekah Snow Jacobs they trusted me to be? I didn't know if Olivia or Cassie harbored the same questions, or if I wanted to know if they did. Did I want us to change? Two halves of me battled, one side desperately fighting to protect my what I had built, the other fearing my fate if I did.

"Yes," I said.

"Well, what do you want to talk about?" Olivia asked me.

"I don't know," I said.

Doubts swelled in the unlikelihood that we could dance this dance, but Cassie, sufficiently bolstered by my willingness to talk, prodded the discussion.

“Tell us what you were going to tell Taryn,” Cassie said, “Tell us about your spiritual experience.”

Those moments in the office that late night felt flat to me under this invitation to express them. How could I tell the story of the lightning strike, the flood of peace and joy passing in and out in spiritual osmosis, my soul swimming in light?

“Well,” I said, and my voice sounded rich and strange to me at the same time, “I was surprised about a lot of it. I have a lot of questions about Joseph Smith...about what’s true. But what really got to me was the part about the women’s blessings. The part you mentioned to me, Cassie. I went home and I stayed up most of that night reading that section. And it bothered me. A lot... I prayed about it. I kept thinking that there was just something wrong with me, that I was too weak or human to understand God’s ways. Or something. I prayed to God to help me to understand, or if he couldn’t help me to understand, to give me peace about it, to let me know that it was okay to let it go and just move on, move forward with life. Then one night in the office, I spoke from my heart, and said ‘I just can’t believe that you would give this priesthood power, this power to act in your name to only half of your children. I can’t believe that you would do that. Please help me to understand.’ And you know, sometimes the Spirit comes back to me. Not always, but sometimes. And that night the Spirit came back and said, ‘You’re right...You’re right. I wouldn’t.’”

Silence flittered between the three of us. Across the field, Dad coughed, and I looked up over at him, his head down in his work. My eyes trailed the line of poplar trees on the west side of the field. We planted them twelve years ago, the four of us, Olivia inspecting the holes Cassie shoveled, and Cassie digging to please, and I packing the wheel barrow with the bundle of yearlings, petite and quaint with their pointy heads and their perfectly triangular

bodies, and Taryn following with the hose over her shoulder, letting water flood where it would until I had dressed the little one properly in the dirt, and then she whipped the hose to the ground and gave the freshly buried roots a long drink. When we planted them, I knew they would grow, and yet I couldn't help but feel startled by them, now tall and strong and straight, as high as the box elders Grandpa had planted with the homestead.

"I think that's wonderful," Cassie said, and Olivia's head shot up to peer at her, but she said nothing.

"You do?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "Who's to say it isn't true?"

"Well, Jared for one," I said, "He said he had to question the source of my inspiration."

Jared had responded to my new questions the way he would respond to one of the kids wanting to know why there weren't any purple elephants in the backyard. He lay across from me in our bed, stroking my hair, eyes filled with concern not for the women who were hiding their tears from the world, but for my obvious and intentional diversion from the truth. After that conversation, I fell into a deep sadness and also a quiet resolve to question everything, and my faith in Joseph Smith began to wane as well.

"Remember when Taryn was born?" Cassie asked, "Remember when you healed her?"

I remembered. Cassie had been four at the time. Did she actually remember it, or did she recall the story Olivia and I told the two of them, over and over on late nights as our parents slept? Mom would always acknowledge it as a miracle, but she held back, as though

speaking of it might drain us of its power. Was it too sacred to speak of or too pagan? I wished she were alive so I could ask her.

“I remember,” I said, and we waited for Olivia. She didn’t speak, but we all knew she remembered, even if acknowledging it didn’t exactly suit her at the moment.

“It was the spring of the year,” I began, “Dad had gone for seeds, and Mom asked him not to go, that she thought she might have the baby, but he went anyway.”

Cassie interrupted the story, “You know, I always wondered... Why wouldn’t he listen to her? Why do you think he went?” she asked.

“To get seeds,” I answered, and they both laughed.

“Anyway,” Cassie said, continuing the script, “Mom’s water broke, and Olivia was right there, holding a bowl of apples.”

“A *basket* of apples,” Olivia corrected, “and I dropped the apples all over the mess. And I yelled for Bekah and we helped Mom to the bedroom. And we called the neighbor, who had stepped out and didn’t answer. And we called the store, and they said that he had come and gone already.”

“Where was he?” Cassie asked, interrupting again, “he should have come back in a half an hour, tops.”

“He said the truck broke down,” I said.

“No,” Olivia said, “He said *Hal’s* truck broke down, remember? It was Hal’s truck and he stopped to help him.”

“That’s right,” I said.

“And Mother kept asking us where he was,” Olivia said, “and we just kept crying and saying we don’t know.”

“And I cried the most,” Cassie said.

“Yes, you cried the most.”

“And then the baby came.”

“Right out of Mother.”

“I never heard Mom scream like that my whole life. I was so terrified.”

“But you were so brave, Bekah. We caught her in our hands, and you took her and wrapped her up like a nurse in a hospital. You were only eight.”

“But she was blue,” I said, “so blue.”

“How blue?” Cassie asked, because Taryn wasn’t here to ask, to recite her lines from the storytelling.

“As blue as a blueberry,” I said, and it had been a long time since anyone had laughed at that childhood joke, so I said it in sadness, and saw the still, blue body, eyes closed tight like a newborn kitten, and the tiny white lips frozen beneath a doll’s nose. Mom started crying out for Joseph, and Olivia crumpled to the floor then, shaking, clutching Cassie to her like an old woman. I held the baby in a strange calm, wrapping her neatly and tucking her in my arm, watching the still, closed face. Mom lay on the bed in a mess of red and black, sweat pouring from her scalp, her hair a matted, dark blanket, her face aged and clenched with sorrow, she had no real face at all, really, and I said, “Mom.” Simple. Just like that, and she looked into my eyes, and her hysteria melted.

“Mother said, ‘Give her a blessing, Bekah.’”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“And she did?”

“She did.”

I laid Taryn in Mom’s arms and placed my hands on her tiny, wet head. Warmth leavened under my palms and fingers and her scalp grew hot. Our breaths filled the room with panic. I sucked in heavy air as a tear slipped down the slope of Mom’s cheek and I choked on my grief. My bare toes curled over loose strands of the shag carpet and a bird called, shrill and bright through the windowpane, oblivious and self-interested in his joy.

“I prayed and asked God to heal her. And then Taryn coughed, and took a breath, and she screamed. She turned from blue to red, like a magic trick. And then the ambulance came, finally.”

“She was fine,” Olivia said, “she was just fine.”

“It was a miracle,” Cassie said, and she smiled at the soil and I could see with acute clarity, baby Taryn in that smile.

That day, that miracle, bonded us to Mom, and it bonded us to her still, though now she was gone. We brought Taryn home from the hospital, Mom looking fresh in a blue rayon dress she had saved for the occasion, her wild hair neatly gathered at her neck. We cradled the baby in the front yard swing, taking turns with her, watching her gray eyes blink against the sun, studying tiny lines crumple where eyebrows would someday be. The wind tussled over us, and the leaves sang, and the greenest grass smiled up at us a trillion pointed smiles and all of this seemed to say, “Baby Taryn lives.” On clear, sunny days, the ranch still whispered the miracle.

“I don’t think Jared should be so quick to judge,” Olivia said, “If he had been there that day, he wouldn’t be.”

We finished the rows. Cassie picked up the watering cans and held the plastic handles with widespread fingers as she hollered to Dad across the field. To my surprise, he listened and started towards the house.

“Do you want lemonade?” Cassie asked us.

We said yes, and I settled Dad with the newspaper in the front room while Olivia mixed the lemonade and Cassie logged the planting date and mapped the field on a piece of scratch paper. The same porch swing we cradled Taryn in that day still sat in the backyard, and the three of us could fit, though it was a tight squeeze. I opted for the less carefree feel of the plastic lounge chair as Cassie and Olivia took turns tapping the cement patio with their toes, maintaining a steady rhythm in the swing.

“You know what always bothered me?” I asked them, “the temple. I hated it.”

“Bekah!” Olivia said.

“Well, I did. It’s the truth. Would you prefer I say nothing about it at all?”

Olivia’s face settled, her guard eased down.

“No,” she said, “What did you hate about it?”

“I guess I hate it more now than I did then. At first, I was just really confused. And everyone said I would understand it the more I went, but you know what? I still don’t understand it. And the old ladies making an example of you if you don’t get your temple clothes on the right way, or fast enough,” I said.

“They don’t mean it like that,” Olivia said.

“That doesn’t make it any less embarrassing. The second time I went to the temple, an old lady snapped at me because my veil fell off in the hallway before I made it to the dressing room. I was so upset I didn’t go back for a year.”

“You were that upset?” Olivia asked, “Why?”

“Because it wasn’t anything like it was supposed to be,” I said, “I was supposed to feel closer to God than I had ever been in my life. I was supposed to be in God’s house. Instead, I had old ladies getting mad at me over my headwear. Something seemed off to me. I was disappointed. Weren’t you disappointed?”

Olivia paused before answering, tucking a strand of blond hair behind her ear as she stared into her lemonade,

“No,” she said, “I was happy.”

The sun slipped an inch behind the mountain and the field darkened. A jackrabbit skittered across the field, perched on her haunches and waited, for.... what? Food? Light? Whatever she wanted, it never came, and she darted back into the brush again.

“What about you, Cass?” I asked, “Did you feel happy?”

Cassie swiped at a fly zipping over the fuzz near her scalp and closed her eyes for a brief moment.

“No.”

“You were disappointed then?” Olivia asked.

“No.”

Cassie circled the rim of her glass with her fingertip, her legs crossed, the top leg pumping in a restless, one limb dance.

“I didn’t know what it would be like,” she said, “but I didn’t think there would be God.”

“You didn’t?” Olivia asked, and she could not smother her incredulous tone. “But why would you do it? Why would you go?”

“Well, I guess because it never occurred to me that anyone thought it was real,” she said, refusing to look at us. “Tradition. Because that’s what we did as Mormons.”

The screen door creaked open, and we all turned to watch Dad step onto the patio, bareheaded and scratching the tuft of gray fur poking out of the first buttons on his thin, rayon shirt. He carried the cane still, by the middle, horizontal over the ground like a yard tool. He looked us over.

“Where did Taryn go?” he asked us.

“She went home,” Olivia said, “She didn’t feel well.”

“She didn’t feel well?”

“No.”

“Didn’t feel well?” he asked again.

“She had a bad day,” Olivia said, now uncomfortable with her lie.

“Well,” he said, and he bent his knees and pulled a weed out of the ground near the edge of the patio and held out the white, naked root, “I didn’t get a chance to apologize.”

“She wasn’t mad at you,” Olivia said, and she took a sip of her drink.

“If she comes back, tell her I’m sorry,” he said.

Olivia said nothing, just crossed her legs and wound her foot in a delicate circle, round and round. Dad wandered into the field. No one asked him where he was going or what he was up to. We watched him meander the field as though releasing a partially filled balloon, gently amused by where it would float to and land. Or maybe we were tired, after all that work, all that friction, all that talk, and we were waiting until necessity required we intervene on his behalf. I studied his aimless movement across the sand, and his age troubled me because it spoke of his mortality and because it whispered secretly of my own. He

hunched slightly as he walked, as though he carried something heavy on his shoulders, something invisible, something that had broken him long before his mind gave out or Mom died, and after all these years sat upon him, triumphant and oppressive, and it would grin and crack its whip, this thing, if it were not invisible.

Dad's gopher trap snapped in the field, and though I knew the sound well from hundreds of earlier moments like this one, the sensation of life going out grabbed me, like flame under fingertips, and I jumped. Dad crossed the field in long, eager strides, death calling to him, a siren to an old man without his wife or his right mind to miss her. He dangled the dead gopher from the chain and held it up for us as he passed by the house, chain in one hand, cane in the other. I caught his eye, and he stopped, and his shoulders slunk even further into that insatiable pit. His face twisted in pain, his tears breaking the surface of his eyes.

"If she comes back," he said, "tell her I'm sorry."

The gopher's head drooped to the side, its neck caught in the vice of death, its jaw peeled open and bearing clenched, tiny, white teeth, blood staining its fur in a necklace. And Dad's face piled with remorse. I saw Taryn then, buckled and white in the trees, her stains dried and black. Tyler had raped us all. Each of us bled slowly in our own way, wrapping wounds with our shame, hoping no one would see the blood, shouting to each other, "Look at the sun, look at the field, look at the trees or the lake or that deer on the hillside, look anywhere but here because I don't want you to see my blood. I don't want to know that I have blood at all."

TARYN*June 30*

Four weeks after I left the ranch in a tirade, Cassie called and summoned me to help out with Dad. Seth and I had been working to the methodic clicks of my keyboard and the soft rustling of his paintbrush, and I had fallen into a gentle meditation to that soft scrape of camel hair to canvas. We worked like this most weekends, passing each other pizza boxes or soggy Chinese cartons, often sharing a fork or a bottle of soda. Normally I found Seth's creative presence bolstering, as though he were an invisible, pleased critic, content to passively acknowledge my work, though I wouldn't show him a word of it. The second draft of my thesis remained suspended in purgatory, half complete, and I surfed the Internet, quietly procrastinating while Seth made enormous progress on a second watermelon painting, this one of a single mother watermelon, teetering perpendicular, with round, pale babies gathered around her base, some with their seed-like eyes shut tight, their mouths dark circles, agape in wails.

I deleted a comma, and then replaced it. The fear of my own potential had finally caught up to me and I was paralyzed from taking the work any further. The gnawing doubt that I had overlooked some major tenet drummed in my subconscious, and the simultaneous terror of both failing and succeeding, of remaining in school for eternity or of moving forward with life, a life after graduate school, crippled my work ethic. I could look at the screen and see my life carefully typed out, two hundred and fifteen pages of documented research, all thoroughly analyzed and objectively evaluated. A master's degree was a petty thing, reduced to texts and forms. Where was the pain? How had it managed to slip underneath the words and between the paragraphs? An outsider would have to employ a good

deal of imagination to understand why these women would forsake their own morals to marry Joseph Smith. And yet, an odd twinge flittered beneath my ribs, affirming that *I* was wrong for not believing in his authority.

On the other hand, Bekah struggled with it too, now. Something somehow had spoken to her, though I hardly found my thesis inspiring as I read it. Facts, all of it. History, nothing to do with today. Why is it that the details of Joseph Smith's polyandry, of the public denials, of the reluctance to allow women to enter the temple, and of the eventual oppression of our spiritual freedoms pricks at some of us, our sense of injustice so thoroughly provoked that it renders us forever changed, and yet for others, this same knowledge only manages a tiny mental dent in our quiet lives? Now there was a thesis worth pursuing, but it was too late for that now, I told myself, and tried to dress the language up with the thesaurus, but it was much like curling the hair of a dead woman before sending her to a dance, and I tried not to shed a tear over it because Seth would certainly notice that, and if I explained, he would insist on reading the stoic, cardboard statue I had erected in honor of women's pain. He still had not forgiven me for showing it to my sisters and not him, though he tried to be gentle with my feelings and pretended he didn't care. In some ways, showing him the foundational tenets of my religion felt like showing him the part of myself I would most like to forget, like that awkward photograph from seventh grade wearing my yellow dinosaur t-shirt, with yellow plastic jewelry to match and a skewed side ponytail flopped on the side of my head like a dog's ear. I didn't want him to know that part of me, because he wouldn't understand it, and I had failed to provide any way for him to appreciate the peace of Sunday, the dependable sights of toddlers in ties, and women doused pearls and knit sweaters and nylons too dark for their skin. And the soft belt of the organ pouring "How Great Thou Art"

over the pot-bellied man with his scriptures open, and the women with the cane resting against her cellulite calf, and the young kneeling on the floor, grinding his toy cars into the pew. I sometimes thought of the white dress I wore inside the temple, the sacred smiles exchanged with strangers, and peace flooded back to me, even though I knew now that the ceremony was changed, that we used to give death oaths. Still, the power of ritual clutched me, and I longed for that communion of space. Sometimes I wished it could have been Seth in the temple with me, but of course, I didn't really wish that, did I? I simply wished for the church to be everything it claimed to be. For everything to be true. I wanted him to understand there were blossoms on that dead tree. I didn't want Seth to see the church as a mostly destructive force to the human spirit, even if I finally determined so myself. Somehow, doing that didn't seem fair.

“You're fidgeting,” Seth said.

He placed his green streaked brush into the tray and grabbed a coke bottle, leaving his eyes on me as he took a long swig. His dark hair clumped together in places by globs of white and green paint, streaking through his hair then in a line across his t-shirt and over his old, twill pants. He worked best without restraint and I shielded my laptop with a tall piece of cardboard propped up behind a stack of old books. Furniture lurked beneath the opaque veils of plastic sheets, and this was how it normally looked, how we usually lived, half in the real world, and half in the one we created for ourselves, using the toilet and the stove and going out to jobs to acquire food, but creating our own moon and stars, and essentially forgetting the disappointments of life by seeking out each moment. Seth did it out of general disdain for the system, and I did it because I was still running from Tyler.

“Seth, are you in love with me?”

For eight months, I had been careful not to push myself, not to care about love at all, really, but to throw out everything that had been me and allow nature to take its course. Six weeks in a summer art history class and a dead car battery put us together. Nothing else. And yet I needed Seth to say something witty during the commercials or to point out the irrationality of my logic during a political argument, or to mumble, “fantastic,” across my shoulder on his way to the bathroom, as I stood in front of the mirror, sucking my stomach in. I needed all of that.

Seth looked over my face carefully, as though I were one of his paintings and picked up a brush.

“Yes.”

He turned away from me and swept a long streak of pink across the former purity of a blue sky. There was no fanfare with Seth. No drama. And this felt exactly right somehow, to deduce our emotions to simple facts and get on with it.

“You do?” I asked.

“Yeah, I do. Is that okay?”

“I didn’t expect you to say that,” I said.

“What did you expect me to say?”

“I don’t know. I guess I thought you would run for the door.”

“Did you want me to run for the door?”

“No.”

“Then why ask?”

I laughed, and I sounded ridiculous. Seth turned, set the brush down, folded his hands in his lap. My cell phone rang on the oak end table. I leapt up, fluffing up the skirt of a plastic

sheet we laid over the armchair to protect it from paint, clamping my hand on the sides of the phone to silence the bleeping.

“It’s Cassie,” I said.

Seth sat silent, his mouth dropped in resignation, his eyes on the floor. I answered it.

“Taryn, it’s me,” she said, “Dad is sick. He’s been in bed for two days.”

“Two days? What’s wrong with him?”

“I thought it was just a cold,” she said, “Or a case of hypochondria. You know Dad.

But then he had a fever, and it’s moved into his lungs. If he’s not better tomorrow, I’m taking him in.”

“Well, if there’s anything I can do…”

“Actually, there is,” she said. “He’s been asking for you.”

“Me?” I asked, “Why would he ask for me?”

“I don’t know.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I said.

“Can you come?” she asked, “I really can’t calm him down.”

“Can’t calm him down?” I echoed, and alarm flamed in my chest, a sharp dig right between my collarbones.

“What has he been saying?”

“He keeps saying he wants to apologize.”

“For what?”

“He won’t say. Maybe if you come down…”

“Right. Okay. I’m coming. Give me an hour.”

I hung up, and the phone slipped through my fingers and smacked the hardwood floor. The room darkened around me as though a black cloud had risen from below, forcing the canvases along the wall and the covered furniture into shrinking details of a dream, and then I found myself half suspended over the dragon head of my Tibetan rug, draped in Seth's arms.

"What happened?" I asked.

"You started to faint," he said, and tilted me onto my feet.

"I did?"

Seth held me from behind, his breath in my ear. I tried to pull away. I wanted to look at him, but he held me in place with a hard squeeze, whispered, "It's okay." My heart raced beneath his forearm and I shoved him away from me. My leg knocked the coffee table as I spun around. He stumbled, catching himself on the easel, then fought to keep it upright. He turned. His eyes opened wide, and I caught myself behind the irises of his eyes in perfect roundness, falling deep into that simple, black center. He raised his hands in surrender.

"I'm not the bastard you think I am," he said.

"I don't think you're a bastard, Seth," I said.

"Sometimes, you do."

Cassie waited on the front porch for me to arrive, her legs and arms crossed, the wind tossing two large chunks of sand-colored curls over her face like the flopping ears of a spaniel. Amanda and Chloe sat on the cement walkway, sidewalk chalk and tiny bits of gravel adorning their knees, drawing rabbits and sunshines and flowers in pastel purples and blues. The girls jumped up to hug me when they recognized me stepping out of the car. I

hugged them in turn, and set them down and they clung to me, yanking my neck over the ground, dragging my purse with them. A brunette and a blond, I couldn't help but see Cassie and me in her girls, though the ages reversed in them.

Cassie stood and put her hands on the top of her head, holding her hair down as tassels flew up around her fingers. She smiled. Her eyes, red and pale, seeped fatigue.

"How is he?" I asked.

"He isn't getting any better yet."

"And how are you?"

She closed her eyes and a wave of peace washed over her face. A ripple of hardship flittered in her eyes as she opened them again, and then it was gone.

"Me?" she asked, "who am I?"

"You're Mommy," Amanda said.

"Yes, I'm Mommy," she said.

Sunlight peeked through the blinds as we made our way down the hallway, past the shelf with Mom's porcelain dolls, the six of them with their backs to the wall, their legs stretched out in a long line, their white leather shoes dangling over the edge of the shelf like a day on the pier. Mom never allowed us to touch them. I remember the day Mom left us alone to go shopping, and while everyone stayed out hanging upside down from the apple branches, I crept inside and took down the one with the red ringlets and the blue gingham dress, the one three inches taller than the others. I don't know if it was the pure white of her face that called to me more, or the delicious thrill of touching the forbidden. What right did Mom have to keep possessions all to herself? I remember as a child believing she belonged to

us, that she had no other self. How I longed to sit by her bed now and ask her where her mind drifted when she didn't think of us, to learn the secrets she kept tucked on the shelf with the dolls.

My father sat propped against the headboard, his gray hair fanned out above his head like the ruffled feathers of a bird. Cassie shut the door behind us. The blanket was pulled up tight over his chest, the hem of the sheets tucked under his armpits. A patch of black and white hair spilled over the neckline of his mesh garment top, stray hairs poking out through the tiny holes in the white fabric like sprouted plants. Soft, white feet landscaped in blue veins poked out at the end of the bed, beneath the hems of pale blue pajama bottoms. Alongside his thigh, resting on the quilted bedspread, lay the healing cane. My father took a moment to recognize me, and then he clasped his hand around the head of the cane and pinned me under his gaze. His eyes searched, fluttering in a rich, vibrant blue, so young and alive, as though his eyes had nothing at all to do with the parts of him that were old. I was startled.

"Taryn," he said, or rather he tried to say, but the word came out hoarse and weak.

I walked to the bedside table and handed him the glass of water. Cassie must have brought it in earlier. He took a small sip and handed it back to me, then looked away. I wondered if that moment of vibrancy had passed, the connection we shared here and gone as a flash of lightning on the horizon, but his eyes, roaming the room, landed upon me again, and sparked.

"You've been asking for me," I said.

"Yes," he said, "I wanted to say..."

His voice trailed. He looked out the window and settled into a deep silence. *My God, he's dying*, I thought, as his apology hung in the air, the apology I never imagined I would get. And that night closed in on me, and I was again lying on the dirt floor of the chicken shed, the sound of pain in my ears as Tyler yanked at my hair, blood sliding between my lips, and my dumbfounded father, standing helpless, watching us, watching me, it seemed. And then he vanished like an apparition. So quick, I didn't know if he had really been there at all, if I hadn't conjured him, and yet the truth had tumbled inside me for years like a sleeping troll.

"You were there," I said, and I couldn't breathe. I suffocated under the words, "You were there that night..."

"We've had a lot of rain this year," he said, "The plants are bigger than normal."

He continued staring out the window. A summer storm crept over the field, darkening the room. The adolescent plants stood fixed in their rows, the fat leaves darting and flipping in the wind, trying to break free. Rain splattered the window in fat, loud drops, obscuring the view. The yearning faded from me, and I walked to the end of the bed, crossed my arms over my stomach.

"Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?" I asked.

"With luck, the crops will yield," he said, "If our Father in Heaven smiles on us."

My father often spoke of our Father in Heaven, daily in the growing season, and as a young girl, I listened for his prophecies, certain he knew things that I didn't. At fourteen, I loaded the watermelon onto the trailer, the next watermelon even bigger than the last, then driving the four-wheeler and trailer forward a few yards and hunting in the rows again. *Look at them*, he said, *Look at what our Father in Heaven has blessed us with*. And it was hard

evidence indeed of God's love. I fell into a deep trust of my father, as he had the faith to produce crops, and to bless me to be healed when I fell sick, and even to cut the head off the family turkey and assure us that it was okay, that God put the turkey here for us to eat, and it was all okay. How I longed to put my trust in him again and make the bad of this world disappear.

Growing up, I held the mistaken belief that I would someday access this same connection to God. The night before my wedding, as I walked Tyler to the door, my father slapped him on the back and said, "My baby girl will be yours tomorrow. You be sure to take care of her." It bothered me, though I couldn't articulate why I didn't want to be given to my husband, that I didn't want to be taken care of, and yet I felt ashamed for not wanting it. I had spent that morning in the temple for the first time and witnessed God giving Eve to Adam, waiting patiently for the yin to meet the yang, for Adam to then be given to Eve, only that moment never came. And I understood it all then, that I was never meant to have God at all without a father, or without a husband. Perhaps it was this belief that compelled my father to say that I had a duty to remain married, after all he had seen.

"I'm going now, Dad," I said, "If there isn't anything you need."

The wind blew hard against the window, whining.

"Wait," he said.

He held the cane up, pointing it at me, his arm shaking a bit. His hand covered the aluminum cap nestled into the knob handle, and in my mind's eye I saw three strands of Joseph Smith's post-mortem hair pressed beneath a fractured bit of coffin glass. My father kept the cane in a black, cloth bag in the far corner of his closet, and I only snuck into the closet once to pull the cane out, deciding after a minute or two that it made me uneasy.

“Your great, great grandfather carried this across the plains,” he said, and it was the same speech I had heard every time he had brought it out. “It was carved from the oak coffin of the prophet Hyrum Smith. It holds the sacred hair of the prophet Joseph Smith. This here cane healed your grandfather when he was sick. Bought him ten years.”

“Are you sure there isn’t anything you want to talk to me about, Dad?” I asked.

“I’m giving it to you,” he said.

The cane turned beneath the twist of his fingers, the varnished oak grooves dancing under my father’s uneven grip. Giving it to me?

“Don’t you still need it?” I asked.

“Nah, I’m done with it. Don’t think I have much time left,” he said.

I shuddered.

“Don’t talk like that,” I said, “You keep it safe.”

“I’m done with it, I said. I want you to have it.”

He held the cane out to me still, though his arm trembled and lowered, the cane sinking towards the bed. I didn’t move, waiting for the cane to drop.

“Why do you want me to have it?” I asked.

“Good grief, girl, if someone offers you the healing power of the prophet, you take it! You don’t stand around wondering about it, you just get down on your knees and thank your Father in Heaven it was given to you!”

“Tell me *why* you want me to have it.”

“It’s a modern day staff of Moses. Who wouldn’t want that?”

“Why not Cassie? Why not Olivia, or Bekah? Why me?”

He settled into this question, his eyes running the length of the cane.

“The sons of Abraham wondered why Joseph was given the birthright.”

“Because I’m the youngest? So that’s why?”

“They were jealous of his coat. They sold him as a slave.”

“Is this your way of apologizing, Dad? Are you trying to say you’re sorry?”

“Then he saved all of Egypt.”

“You know I don’t believe that stuff anymore.”

He gazed at me and his expression melted, as though coming out of a trance. He laid the cane across his lap and licked his lips. The wind shrieked for help against the window, and then tore off into the field, running from whatever pursued her.

“Why is it I can only talk to you about religion?” I asked, “Why can I never talk to you about anything else?”

“Well, I’m the bishop. What do you expect?”

“You *were* the bishop. Now you are just my father.”

“So you refuse the healing cane?”

For reasons unclear to me, my eyes welled up at his offering the cane to me, though I couldn’t make sense of any of it, and I fought a sinking dread as I imagined the cane riding in the car beside me. The tears spilled.

“Tell me what you saw that night,” I whispered, “Tell me what is bothering you. It will never go away if you don’t talk about it, Dad. You have carried it a long time. Ten years. And it hasn’t gone away. It will find you when you’re alone. It will catch you right before you smile, in those moments when you think you might be happy. I know better than anyone. Tell me.”

Thunder groaned from above, and he looked up into the light fixture, as though the dissatisfaction of the storm revealed his thoughts on the world. He didn't understand that the sky wept, that sometimes the pressure in the air was simply too great.

“So you refuse it, then?”

“For what? To ease your conscience? No, I can't take it. I'm sorry.”

He sputtered into a cough and reached for the bedside table, plucking a handkerchief from behind the glass of water. He covered his mouth and lunged forward in the bed, hacking. His cough sustained and deepened, dragging the breath out of him. He pulled away from the cloth heaving, blood flashing beneath his lips, coloring his teeth.

“Then you are lost.”

CASSIE*July 7*

Dad's condition improved slightly a few days after Taryn left and I didn't expect him to take that sudden nosedive for the worse. On Sunday morning he had a high fever. He stared at me through glass eyes, grasped my arms with his hot palms and whispered my mother's name. He smelled of sweat and grapefruit juice, which was all he asked for those days. I peeled his fingers from my wrist, and opened a window. The sound of truck passing filled the room, and I set the fan in front of his face. Then I retreated to the privacy of the bathroom, and sunk to the floor. I had been hiding the panic attacks for two months now. I would study the dust gathered on the waxen leaves of eucalyptus my mother kept in a copper milk can on the bathroom floor, and waited for the fear to subside.. I held my chest, wheezing, quietly rebuking myself. All the uncertainty of the world pressed down upon me, it seemed, and I could not be convinced that the chaos I felt existed outside my control, that I was not somehow responsible for any glimmer of unhappiness. No one else could know how deeply I had failed.

I didn't want to tell Garrett about Dad's fever. Every day he talked of the nursing home. He said he didn't want to have to live this way, and yet I reveled in it, didn't I? Sometimes I watched Garrett when he came home, leaning against the kitchen counter, circles of sweat on his button down shirt, his dark eyes watching the window to the field as he emptied a glass of water in one try. He didn't know watched him. I don't know if he knew I was there at all. I would think back to the days when we held hands walking across campus, amazed by the flowers on the path, or the perfectly trimmed grass, anxious to begin our lives. I don't think he ever asked me if I wanted to be a mother. But I had wanted it,

hadn't I? What woman didn't want it, and would I be any sort of woman at all if I didn't? I was too afraid not to want it at the time. But I did not know my life would be spent waiting, or that if my loneliness got the better of me it would be my own doing. It was his job to provide for the family, and it was my job to care for the children, and as long as he did his part, it was my job to do mine, and if I no longer wanted to do it, then that would be my burden, as my husband would say, or as the other mothers would say, or as God Himself would say. How I longed for Garrett to feel unsatisfied with our lives, to ache for something more as I did, and so I invited chaos into our lives, made a place for it at the table. Chaos chased away the doom. As long as my father was ill, I would have work.

I gave my father some aspirin and herded the girls to my bedroom so I could spray down and brush their hair. Garrett stood in the adjacent bathroom with the door open, fixing his tie. I found his face in the mirror.

"You don't want to go to the last meeting?" he asked.

I looked down at the floral print on my pajama bottoms, touched my disheveled hair. We had taken turns attending meetings on Sundays over the last few months, so one of us could look over Dad. Some days I opted out from church entirely, though when I did, a quiet tension emerged between us.

"I think I'm going to stay home today," I said.

I listened to the hiss of running water, watched Garrett's elbows bob up and down in the bathroom doorway as he combed his hair. I sent the girls out to play, though I knew they might get dirty, and called after them to stay clean. The four tan soles of their black patent shoes flashed down the hall. Garrett sauntered out, his hair wet, his broad chest strapped in a white shirt, cinched in a blue tie. He sat on the bed, his socks dangling from his fingers.

“Why don’t you want to go?”

His brown tie flopped over his belly as knelt to pull on his socks. I imagined touching the folded silk, running my hand up to his chin. The sun moved behind a cloud, and the room softened, and there in the gentle light, I felt safe, felt that I would not always have to hide.

“I don’t know if I believe in God,” I told him, “I don’t know if I ever did.”

“What?”

His face shot up, and the magic of the moment, the perfect safety that ensconced me, burst, and I could not be sure I had said this at all, that I had dropped my deepest secret from my lips. And oh, why did I do it? Some things said could not be unsaid, and didn’t I know this? Wasn’t it this that drove me to the bathroom floor, that stole the breath from me? I did not have a plan. And I had spent my entire life with a plan, carefully weighing the benefits and expenses of each small choice, right down to what I ate for breakfast in the morning. And I couldn’t make sense of what was happening to me, other than to acknowledge that I could not bear to struggle alone anymore.

“All these years I haven’t told you,” I said, “I haven’t let you in. And I’m sorry for that. But I was so afraid you wouldn’t love me if you knew.”

It felt good to cry openly this way, to embrace my inadequacy, to invite Garrett to do the same. I almost smiled, ready at last to discover what lay beneath the surface of our partnership. I thought of our winter honeymoon in Jackson, eight years ago, the way he held me against him, our clasped naked bodies, his breath on my neck, the intense grip of his arms about me. Certainly that had been real if nothing else was.

“Is this about Taryn’s book?”

I tried to remember the book. It tumbled around somewhere in the back of my mind. Slowly, I understood that this is how he would make sense of what was happening. To him, I was changing because he did not know me.

“No, not really,” I said, “It brought things up, surely. But I have always felt this way.”

“But you haven’t,” he said, “You believed before. It wasn’t until recently...”

His voice fell into the background of my consciousness, like a television episode in which I had lost interest because I could predict the outcome. I watched his lips move, studied the anger in his face, wondered how much of it I could ease if I backpedaled fast enough. And then he stopped, waiting. I suppose he had asked a question.

“It’s times like these that I just can’t believe,” I said.

He blinked and started, as though I had clapped my hands quickly in front of his eyes.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I can’t even speak,” I said, “I don’t even have a voice.”

“I know you miss work,” he said, “I know it’s hard being here with the kids all day and taking care of your dad. It isn’t easy.”

For a year and a half this discussion lay on the shelf, in some dark pantry of our marriage. I believed he had forgotten it, having no perceivable connection to me outside of the meals, the mornings, the weekly discussion over opened bills. Yet instinctively, he had fished this part of me to the surface.

“That’s right. It isn’t easy,” I said.

“But what else can you do? Do you want to put the girls in daycare all day?”

“What if I did?”

He gaped at me a few moments, and then stood, walked over to the dresser to pick up his watch, fumbling with it as he eyed me.

“That’s what you want,” he challenged, “you are going to put our girls in daycare so you can go to work.”

“Would that be the worst thing in the world? I just don’t think it’s the worst thing in the world.”

He shook his head and stared into the carpet. In those few moments, hope swelled and rose, and then collapsed, my heart nothing more than disturbed bread dough. A waste. A sudden rage lit inside me, burning behind my ribs until I thought I might rip at my hair. How stupid of me to hope. How irresponsible.

“Anyway, this isn’t about that,” I said, but somehow this felt like a lie, that somehow it very much was about that, but I could not quite make sense of it, like a crossword clue with only one possible answer, but too many letters in the key.

“So you no longer believe,” he said, “You don’t want to go to church anymore.”

“Let’s just say I don’t want to go to church *today*,” I said, “I’ve been in this place for a long time, Garrett. There’s no reason to panic. Really.”

I stood, and he rushed at me, pulling me against him. I pressed his shoulder blades into me, kissed his neck, still moist from the shower.

“I feel like I’m losing you,” he said.

“I’m right here,” I said, “I’m not going anywhere.”

I walked out with him, helped him get the girls strapped into the white Prius. Then I leaned into the driver’s side window and kissed Garrett good-bye. The fear in his eyes had left, gone some place deep inside him, or perhaps had evaporated into the air. His life could

have been different if he hadn't met me. He would have finished college, at least. Every morning he went to work at the construction site, and he came home each night, and I owed him for that, didn't I? As I watched him pull out of the driveway, my hand shielding my eyes from the sun, I mourned the end of our discussion. Perhaps another eighteen months would pass before we would speak of it again.

Dad moaned loudly from the bedroom when I walked back inside. I found my way to him, pulled the sheet from his chest. He watched me, his eyes glazed and defeated, and coughed without lifting his head. His hand lay listless beside him as though it had disconnected from his body. I thought he would speak as I gathered up the dishes, but he didn't, simply watched me like a prisoner of war who didn't speak the language.

I knew he did not feel well to be this quiet. My father was never quiet indoors. With a rake in hand, or an animal to tend to, he settled into peaceful work, but inside, he itched for conversation. I often thought that if Mom had given him a basket of clothes to fold, or a vegetable to chop, he could have been more compatible. He paced about the house in the early evening, too worked up to sit, and pestered us about chores, or wanted us to look at the seed catalog, and then if we looked, he hardly noticed at all, but pulled it back to himself and commented again, more to himself the second time. With Dad, life was about accomplishing, and if he wasn't in the process of accomplishing, he was planning the next accomplishment, and I don't ever remember him pausing to admire the work. His drive had slowed in him some these last few years, certainly, but the incessant restlessness had seemed to double. He would analyze the weather and assess the height of the plants out the window, and when he finished, he would begin it again, until I reminded him he had said that already, and then he

moved on to the next meal, what would we be having, or if I set it in front of him, he wanted to know what was in it, and then on to tell me how Mom had made it, and when that ended, we were back to the weather again. Perhaps he always spoke to reassure himself he was not yet dead, and who was I to take that from him, I reminded myself as I hissed through my teeth, “I don’t know, Dad. I already said I don’t know.”

But here he lay, silent and still. A bad omen, I knew, as I walked to the kitchen, rubbing my chest. If I didn’t call my sisters, I would be dealing with Garrett instead, so after a cup of herbal tea, I picked up the phone.

Bekah appeared on the porch an hour later, stray hairs looped on the back of her head, her brown eyes swallowed in dark circles.

“I shouldn’t have called you,” I said.

She brushed past me as though I had not spoken at all, and made her way to the bedroom. Dad moaned a bit when he saw her. I expected her to go to him, but instead, she stepped back into the hallway with me and shut the door.

“He’s been this way for a while?” she asked.

I pulled the thermometer from my robe pocket.

“Did you want to check his temperature?”

“Course not. You’re the nurse. What do you think we should do?”

“He needs to go in.”

My voice broke, and this surprised me, like a forgotten dollar falling out of my coat pocket. I would be relieved finally, but then I didn’t want him to go. I felt my life slipping out from under me, felt the walls of a dark, empty room closing in. Bekah put her hand on my shoulder, and I flinched beneath her touch, burned by the awareness of my physical

being, a literal person someone else could feel. I could not feel myself, but often thought I existed in my own mind, as my own imaginary friend. And the parts of me that were real belonged to others.

“Cassie, you’ve done a wonderful job,” Bekah said, “Whatever he had on you, you have more than made up for it. You need to be free of it.”

The tears stopped, and a wave of peace passed over me. Someone had given me permission to stop caring for my father. Did I want him to die? Was I any sort of person at all if I did? When I didn’t surrender myself to the needs around me, my mind drummed and pulled until I found myself folding laundry at midnight, or reading to the girls in the middle of an interesting TV show, or answering the same question for the sixteenth time. Part of me didn’t believe I could stop, but a quieter part of me feared what could happen when I found myself back at home with the girls. I had already decided that I was not going back to that life, but I remained only semi-conscious of this decision. It pushed around inside like a swallowed coin, slowly passing through me.

“Come on,” she said, “I’ll help you pack him up.”

I pushed the wheelchair through the house from the back bedroom as Bekah went through Dad’s closet, picking out mostly T-shirts, slippers and robes. We completed this brief ritual just as we had done with Mom, filling the same burgundy suitcase, making judicious calls about hairbrushes and toiletries.

“Are we going on a trip?” Dad asked us. My father never took vacations.

“You’re going to the hospital, Dad,” Bekah told him, “Your fever is bad. You need more help than Cassie can give you.”

Dad lifted his head off the pillow, and his eyes blinked awake.

“I don’t want to go to the hospital,” he said. He waved a hand at us as though shoosing us off to go play. It never felt quite right, telling him how it was going to be. I secretly felt ashamed, as though I should let him wander out naked into a snowstorm simply because he was my father.

“Dad, you have to go,” Bekah said, “You’re not going to get any better if you don’t. Do you want to die?”

I wanted to kiss her on the mouth for being so bold. Someone needed to step into Mom’s role, to say the things she would have said, but I could never bring myself to. If I attempted it, my father shot me right down, and could I blame him after I approached him with such timidity? Even I didn’t believe me. But here Bekah stood, her large, commanding presence at the end of the bed like a sentinel, her fat voice waking us both out of our communal coma.

“What can they do for me?” he asked her, and it was clear he was listening to her now.

“Get this fever under control, for one thing. Make sure you’re not fighting a massive infection or something else we can’t handle.”

He fingered the cane by his side, his silence admitting defeat.

“Give me an hour,” he said.

“An hour?”

“Yes.”

“And then you will go to the hospital?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. You have one hour. Then, we’re going.”

He blinked his concurrence, staring into the knot handle of the cane. We left the suitcase open on the floor, meandered around the wheelchair and slid out of the room. In the kitchen, Bekah opened the dishwasher and began to stack the dishes away.

“You don’t have to do that,” I said, and she ignored me. Her eyes looked past the glasses, the silverware, the cupboards as she worked, to some place far from here. I poured two glasses of water and sat at the table.

“How are you, Bekah?” I asked, and she glanced at me before opening the knife drawer.

“I don’t know who I am anymore, Cassie,” she said, “I feel like I’m somebody completely different.”

“That’s normal, isn’t it?” I said, “To change. I feel that way myself these days.”

“I don’t think Jared can deal with it,” she said.

And I understood, maybe better than she did, what she stood to lose. What good is self-respect if you lose everything else? In these moments I did not admire her bravery, but wanted to distance myself from it, as though it might be contagious. I wanted to dive down back into my hole, and bury these doubts once again. But my doubts used to be wooden, lifeless creatures, and now they squirmed and wriggled free and danced all by themselves.

“You struggle with the church sometimes, I know,” she said, “but do you ever think of what it would mean for you if none of it was true? I mean, would you do things different?”

She stopped putting spoons away to stare me down, the spoons jiggling restlessly in her hands as they smacked into her palm. Dancing, she’s dancing, I thought, though only the spoons moved, but still she bubbled with a new energy, a vibrancy I had forgotten she possessed, or perhaps I thought it had died in her adolescence.

“Would you?” I asked.

She stacked the spoons one by one, and turned slowly, picked up her glass of water from the table.

“Did you ever let Garrett hurt you?” she asked, “Do you give into him all the time because he’s the husband? Because you thought that’s how it was supposed to be? Did you start to believe you didn’t matter?”

I hesitated responding. I felt like I gave into Garrett all the time, that through small, daily decisions he had managed to shape our entire lives, and yet Bekah was not really asking me about Garrett at all.

“You matter, Bekah,” I said, “I know that much.”

A smile spread across her face. The light caught in the corner of her eye, and I could see my sister, see the purity that she carried in her, and it struck me then, how much magic we carry in us, and how great a miracle it would be if there was no God, as much a miracle as when people believe there is.

“I didn’t know,” she said.

The hour finished, and we found Dad just as we left him. He glanced at us both, then looked at the floor. I thought he might start to protest as I dressed him in his shirt and jeans, but instead he limply obliged. Bekah finished packing and zipping the suitcase, then picked up the healing cane from Dad’s side, holding it out from her.

“What is this doing out?” she asked.

“He’s had that out since before Taryn came over. He tried to give it to her, but she wouldn’t take it.”

“Really?”

Dad started a bit, as though I had poked him.

“I never tried to give it to her,” Dad said. He blinked up at me.

“You didn’t?” I asked.

“Of course not. It was my great grandfather’s. Why would I give it to her?”

Bekah eyed me, found the cane’s case against the wall and packed it away.

“We’ll want to take that,” Dad said, “I’ll need it.”

“Of course, Dad. We’ll take it,” Bekah said.

We worked together to put him in the chair and Bekah set the cane across his lap. I covered him with a sheet, and wheeled him out to Bekah’s van.

“Let me take that from you Dad, and put it in the back,” Bekah said, and took the cane.

He moaned a little as I situated him in the passenger seat and pulled the seatbelt across him, but he didn’t object, dwelling in an uncanny silence. I stepped back to close the door when his hand shot out and grabbed hold of my arm. I jumped. His mouth quivered as though words worked their way to the surface, his glassy blue eyes searching wildly for me.

“Tell Sandy to put dinner in the fridge,” he said, “She gets mad when I don’t let her know I’ll be late.”

I always struggled with whether or not to allow him to inhabit an alternate reality. At times it seemed cruel to tell him the truth. At other times, it seemed irresponsible not to.

“I’ll tell her,” I said, “But she won’t be mad. She just wants you to take care of yourself.”

I walked around to the back and helped Bekah hoist the suitcase and the wheelchair inside. She handed me the case for the cane.

“Put this back,” she whispered.

“You don’t think he’ll miss it?”

She shook her head, “Once we get there, he’ll forget all about it. The doctors will have their hands full with Dad as it is. Besides, if Olivia saw we brought it, she would freak.”

Doubt swarmed me as I tucked the case against my leg and walked past the van, but I found myself comforted in Bekah’s conviction, almost as though her certainty would make it true and I needn’t worry. I carried the cane through the house to Dad’s bedroom and leaned it against the wall in the back of his closet, quietly shelving it with my guilt.

When I walked back outside, they were gone.

OLIVIA*July 7*

After I hung up the phone with Bishop Allred, I found Mike in the den, surfing the Internet for sports stats. He often holed up here on the weekends, after yard work on Saturdays and before and after church. Months had passed since I had thought to complain about his reclusion, but it annoyed me now, as the tensions in my life had increased with Dad admitted to the hospital yesterday.

“That was the bishop. He said he could meet us at the hospital to give Dad a blessing,” I said.

“Uh-huh.”

I stood with my arms across myself, waiting. He continued scrolling the screen, reading an article.

“He said he thought the missionaries were there today, if we needed another priesthood holder,” I said.

“Uh-huh.”

“Do we?”

“Do we what?”

“Need another priesthood holder?”

He glanced up at me, now, then back to the screen.

“No. I told you I would come.”

“Mike.”

I reached over his shoulder and pressed the power button to the monitor. He sighed, slumping his shoulders as he spun around in his office chair to face me. His black hair

reflected beneath a mask of gel, an odd glistening cap to the layers of waves in his forehead. When did he get so old? I wondered to myself as I noticed the lines creeping about his eyes, though the weariness permeating from him aged him much more than the years, I think. He was a parody of sorts, a middle aged man impersonating a scolded teenager. When had the dynamics of our marriage reached this point, I wondered, though I scrolled backwards through the years in my mind unable to pinpoint the change. I only knew things used to be different between us, that he used to come home and lift me off the kitchen floor into a hug, that we used to argue and negotiate how to spend the evening without thinking we could part ways to settle the matter. But that was so long ago, cobwebs had formed over those memories, and I was a different girl then, not someone I remembered as myself really, more like a friend I recalled from my youth.

“What?” he asked, throwing his palms up.

“Are you sure you’re in the right spirit to give a blessing?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I mean you never act like you’re in the mood to do anything anymore.”

“What do you want from me?”

A moment lingered between us. What did I want? I wanted us to want the same things, to find some common joy, not every day, but at milestones, at least. I felt our lives diverging, sensed Mike dropping his side of the handcart, but each time I lifted my head to watch him leave, he picked it up again.

“I want to know what’s going on inside you,” I said, “I want to be part of your life.”

He looked down at his hands, his eyes steady, concentrating as though it took a great effort to keep down what he hid from me.

“Talk to me,” I said, “Tell me.”

“It’s just difficult, sometimes, you know?” he said, and he looked at me finally, “Work, the kids, church. Work, the kids, church. Every week is exactly the same. Sometimes I just stop and wonder to myself, is this all there is?”

“So you’re *bored*?” I asked, “You’re bored with our lives together? With me?”

“No, that’s not it,” he said, and placed his hands together in front of his mouth in thought, “I’m not bored, exactly. I’m just... dissatisfied.”

“I guess I don’t understand the distinction.”

“Don’t you ever want to shake things up, Olivia? I mean, do you ever? I know you like your routine. But sometimes I start to dream about getting away, the two of us. A beach somewhere. Maybe a cocktail. You in a bikini,” he said.

“A *cocktail*?”

He smiled, and a hoarse chuckle escaped through his teeth, “I said *maybe*.”

“Now you’re laughing,” I said, “So this is about the church, isn’t it?”

“Why are you so angry?”

“Why am I so angry?” I nearly shouted. “You know what I’ve been going through. You know what my sisters have been putting me through. I thought you were on my side.”

“Olivia, I am on your side.”

“I don’t understand you,” I said, “We have the perfect family. We have the perfect life. But that’s not enough for you. You’re a successful lawyer. Our children would make any parents proud. We have a nice house. You serve in the bishopric. Everyone wants to be us. In fact, the only person I know of who doesn’t want to be us is you!”

“Olivia,” he said, and he stood and tried to hold me, but I pushed him away.

“I have worked so hard to be the perfect wife. To be your perfect wife. Do you know how hard that has been? Do you have any idea?”

“I never asked you to be the perfect wife.”

“So this was all *my* idea?” I asked, “Committing my life to raising this family? You didn’t want me to do that?”

“If you had wanted something else, I would have supported you.”

“Well, now is a fine time to tell me that,” I said.

“Please,” Mike said, “I love you.”

Startled, I lowered my hands, and he closed in on me, pulling me to him.

“I want to believe that our love is bigger than the church,” Mike said, “I want to believe we could love each other no matter what. But I don’t know if I can believe that. Not unless you show me that it’s true.”

“And how would I do that?”

“Come away with me. Let’s take a trip. We’ll leave everything behind.”

“And drink cocktails?” I asked, sarcastic.

“I don’t know. Maybe we would. Maybe we wouldn’t. Who knows what would happen.”

He pressed against me and I felt the familiar prod of an erection through his jeans. Shocking, it was absolutely shocking he would be so aroused by this conversation, that it seemed to inspire in him what I alone could not, and the connection I so desperately sought with him was now being offered to me, but at an enormous price.

“I think you’re being childish,” I said, “I think once you run off and have your fun, you will realize how foolish you are being. And how ungrateful.”

I didn't understand this change in him. Did he think I didn't get bored? Did he think that it had not occurred to me as I dashed from yoga class to visiting teaching to young women's leadership meetings that I was giving up an awful lot of myself? I had my moments, too. Those days when Mike worked late, and dropped in for twenty minutes to eat dinner and left again for a bishopric meeting, I had my moments. The church wanted him out in the world, earning money for the family, but they wanted him at church, too, and that had felt at times utterly unfair. Oh yes, there were those days for me when none of it seemed right. But I let them pass. Wasn't that the test? Wasn't that why we came here to earth?

"We shouldn't talk about this now," he said, and he dropped me, "We should be thinking about your dad. What time are we meeting the bishop?"

I could hardly think. It took several moments for me to process the question.

"Twelve."

Mike glanced at the clock on the wall. It was only eleven. He nodded, and slid back into his chair. For months I had attempted to peel back the layers, to pierce my way through his dense shell and enter his atmosphere. Instinctively, he had pulled away, resisted, and now I understood why. He had struggled in secret for much longer than I had known, but the battle warring inside him had long destroyed doubt, and now fought against desire. How had he moved past all the answered prayers, those times when we wept together in the presence of the Holy Spirit? How did he reconcile what I know he knew? More disturbing than his doubts was his rejection of our past. Was I losing him, or was this some kind of mid-life phase? Regardless, I was certain I had much bigger issues than cocktails.

"I do want to talk to you, Mike," I said, "I do want to hear you."

"It's all right. Forget about it. Just concentrate on your dad. He needs you right now."

He withdrew back into his private world, at his desk, and I had been shut out again.

I found James and Emily sitting side by side in the family room, video controllers in hand, their eyes glued to the television as they battled together in a new game we bought last week. Avery knelt in a corner of the room in her Christmas pajamas, her My Little Ponies teetering in a circle on the carpet, quietly brushing the pink hair of a purple plastic horse on her lap. I opened my mouth to ask them if they had seen Megan, but then noticed the sound of the shower upstairs.

“We’re giving Grandpa a blessing. Do you want to come?” I asked them.

Avery looked up, “I’ll come!”

I waited for Emily and James to respond.

“I’ll go,” Emily said, blinking at the screen.

“James?”

“Nah. I’ll stay here.”

I thought about interrupting him. He had cooled to the family lately, showed less interest in going to church. I had always dreamed of our only son serving a mission when he turned nineteen, but I now doubted a year would be enough time to rekindle his interest in the gospel. I studied him with fresh eyes, after my conversation with Mike. Did they discuss me behind my back? Did they discuss church? Even as the questions surfaced, I knew I would not conjure the guts to ask, to confront him with the direction of his adulthood. Mike had presented enough challenges to preoccupy me for months.

Megan sat at the edge of her bed in a bathrobe, applying lotion to her feet, her head wrapped in a towel. She looked up, startled as I entered the door to her room, but her expression soon relaxed as she saw me and her face dropped to look at her feet again. I

watched, amazed this grown woman had at one time come from inside me, had been that fragile infant I carried around in a navy sling as I vacuumed with the snow falling behind the windows. She had been mine then. And it seemed a cruel joke that her life now belonged to her. Not that I could complain. She had always been a very careful child, heavily weighing the consequences of each decision; rarely making a move that would garner disapproval, or even attention. Much like I had been. How slow and meticulous she had cut her first paper snowflake, at the age of three, holding the scissors steady, watching me for encouragement with each small clip of the lines I had drawn for her on the folded creases. Her eyes widened with happiness when I unfolded that perfect, symmetrical creation. It lay at the bottom of a drawer in my bedroom, folded in acid free sheets. And the magic of firsts with my first child now neared its completion. The mission for the church, and then the temple wedding, and then her own first child, and I didn't know if there would be much beyond that I could guide her through. But I did not want any of it to come, because then it would end. And soon I would lose James, then Emily then Avery. Slipping, it was all slipping away, whether I liked it or not, and I would be left with only the buzz of my alarm clock to get me out of bed.

“We’re going to the hospital to bless Grandpa,” I told her, “Would you like to come?”

“I can’t,” she said, “Jeff called.”

She said nothing more, as though the sudden phone call from her ex boyfriend explained why she would drop her life.

“Are you meeting him?”

“Yes.”

“To discuss what?”

“I don’t know. He just said he wants to talk, so I agreed to.”

“What do you think it’s about?”

Megan threw off her robe and slipped quickly into black and purple underwear as she spoke, “Mom, if you had it all to do over again. I mean, let’s say you were twenty-one when Dad asked you to get married, instead of nineteen, okay? You were old enough to go on a mission. If you could do it again, would you get married, or would you go on a mission?”

Megan climbed into her jeans and threw a white t-shirt over her head. Air escaped through my teeth against my will.

“Megan, I mean, we talked about this. Jeff doesn’t believe the same way you believe. And you know what you want out of a marriage. We’ve talked about this a hundred times. Megan, I know you.”

“Mom. I’m asking you a question.”

“Yes--no! I would go on a mission. I would go on a mission.”

“And you wouldn’t have me?”

“I would have you later.”

“Maybe you wouldn’t have.”

I sat on the edge of her bed, rubbed my palms against my khaki pants. She stood with her arms crossed.

“Megan, we all have cold feet before a major decision. All of us. Just stick to what the Holy Spirit has told you. He won’t lead you in the wrong direction,” I said.

“I know.”

“Call me when you get done,” I said, “I want to hear about it.”

“Okay.”

I stood, folded her bathrobe and placed it on the chair at her vanity. I brushed the top of her bureau with one hand, trying to wipe the dots of nail polish that had speckled its surface for years.

“Mom?”

I turned automatically, a dog to a whistle. Her voice calling for me ignited the same instinct that pulled me out of bed in the middle of the night when she had been a baby. And now I sought those moments when I could still mother her, to be who I was meant to be, and found them in the smallest words.

“What if the Spirit is telling me to marry Jeff? What then?” she asked.

“Well, the Spirit can’t be telling you both things,” I said, “It’s either one or the other.”

“I know.”

When we arrived at the hospital, Bishop Allred sat in the waiting room, arms folded over his suit. He stood when he saw us, and reached out to squeeze my hand.

“I’m sorry you’re going through this so close to your mother’s death, Sister Buell,” he said, “Hopefully, your dad will recover.”

“Thanks for meeting us,” I said.

“Where’s Megan and James?” he asked, noticing Emily and Avery.

“They had things they couldn’t get out of.”

I noticed the dark bags beneath his eyes, and felt a pang of guilt, calling him here. His work as bishop never ceased, I knew, as Mike’s work as his first counselor never ceased either. Our sons had been best friends all through elementary school, until a falling out at scout camp one year. I knew from our conversations that Bishop Allred worried about James,

about where his life might be going, and it gave me great comfort to know that the bishop worried with me, even when Mike didn't.

I spoke to the nurse. Dad had some form of influenza, she said, and they waited now for the fever to come down. They pumped him with fluids and told him to rest, though he constantly buzzed them to ask for things. "Restless," the nurse said.

My dad lay curled onto his side, clutching the thin, white hospital blanket to his chest. He coughed with his eyes closed. I touched his arm, startled a bit by the heat radiating from him. He cracked his eyes open and peered at me.

"Oh," he said, his voice squeaking out, "Have you been here long?"

"Just got here," I said, "Where's Cassie?"

"Oh, she left a few hours ago," he said, and closed his eyes again.

"Our bishop has come to help Mike give you a blessing," I said, "Would you like one?"

"Well, do you think it will help?"

"Of course I do, Dad. Don't you?"

"I don't know anymore," he said, "Did you see where she put my cane?"

"You don't have a cane, Dad."

"The healing cane."

"The healing cane?" I asked.

An odd moment of panic crept up my throat. My eyes flashed from my father, to the bishop, then Mike, who both stared at me as though I might produce the healing cane from under my jacket. A sacred item, the healing cane had remained in my parents' house for as long as I could remember, brought out only in special circumstances. I had never witnessed

my father attempt to use it, though I didn't doubt its sacred power. Though the heirloom possessed a legitimate position as a healing tool in our family (it had been blessed by high ranking leadership after all), I could not squelch my embarrassment. It was certainly odd that our family possessed such an item, but even more odd that he would attempt to use it in public.

"Dad, I'm pretty sure that's at home," I said.

"I told them to bring it," Dad said, irritated, "They had it in the car."

"I'll call Cassie as soon as we're done and ask her about it, okay? Bishop Allred can only stay a little while."

Dad peered at the bishop as though he could be blamed for the whole mess.

"The power of the prophets has been sealed in that cane," he said, "We will just have to see if I can make it without it."

"Really?" Bishop Allred asked, and stepped forward to the edge of the bed. "Don't you believe, Brother Snow, that our Father in Heaven will heal you if it is His will?"

My cheeks flared and I brushed a dab of sweat from my hairline. My father's example of faith had instilled in me great comfort throughout my life, but sometimes he could be a little fanatical with the details. I know my sisters struggled with this more than I did, as they found his preaching rather restrictive. I came to accept my father, knowing that God would straighten these details out in the end, but having my father's issues presented for our bishop to evaluate caused me to melt into myself with awkwardness.

"I believe God responds to our righteousness. We are blessed according to our obedience," Dad said.

“And you think using a healing cane demonstrates your obedience?” the bishop asked.

“No less so than wearing the temple garment day and night,” he said, “Not all church members have a healing cane, I realize, but if they did, they should be expected to use it.”

“I see,” Bishop Allred said, “Well, *I* believe that if it is God’s will, through the power of the priesthood we could heal you today, Brother Snow, with or without garments or a cane. Would you like us to give it a try?”

“No sense in not trying,” Dad said, “But could you come back and give me another after Cassie brings the cane?”

“Well, I can’t come back,” Bishop Allred said, “But I could send the missionaries. I know they’re making the rounds at the hospital today. Why don’t we just reschedule this then, since you don’t feel ready?”

“Fine with me,” Dad said.

The bishop smiled and nodded. I told the girls to “stay with Grandpa,” and then I walked with the bishop into the hallway, Mike close behind us.

“I’m sorry, Bishop,” I said, and the tears came, even though I hated myself for them.

He took me by the hands. The fluorescent lights from the ceiling reflected in his glasses. He smiled.

“Don’t you worry,” he said, “I know he hasn’t been himself.”

A tingle spread through my chest and down my arms, into my fingers. Of course, my father had been delusional; I had almost forgotten. And the bishop seemed positively amused. Perhaps, I hoped, he didn’t believe we had a healing cane at all.

Bishop Allred smiled again, and patted me on the side of the arm, a little sad, a little tired. It took enormous effort to smile back, cracking cement in the muscles around my mouth.

“Call if you need anything else,” he said.

He walked across the hallway and turned to lock eyes with me as the elevator swallowed him. Mike stared into the yellow tile as though he hoped I wouldn’t notice him standing there.

“You were awfully quiet during all of that,” I said.

“What was there to say?” he asked.

“You could have said ‘thank you.’”

“Well, I’m sorry.”

I waited there in the hospital hallway, for him to say something more. And this is how I had spent most of the last twenty-three years. Hoping for something more, or hoping Mike would notice what had gone missing without needing me to point it out to him. I had carried his side of the handcart for so long now, I was beginning to forget the point of this trek in the first place.

CASSIE*July 8*

Olivia called about the healing cane the same moment I held the screen door for Bekah as she lugged two overstuffed burgundy suitcases, banging them into the doorframe.

Bekah had decided to leave Jared and move into our parents' house after she drove Dad to the hospital. I did not know if the two events were related, or if they were, exactly what the connection could be, but I felt a nagging guilt pricking me in the back of my head each time I tried to think on something else. After Bekah called to ask if she could stay, I paced around the kitchen in a circle for several minutes. Grateful Garrett had taken the girls to his mother's for dinner, I indulged in this spinning, acknowledging to myself that I should stop as the patterned diamonds of the linoleum blurred. How calming it felt to watch the gray tiles spin, to shake the thoughts out with a dizzy spell. If Bekah moved home, that meant I could move back to my house, and then... I was Alice in Wonderland falling into her hole.

I nodded a greeting to Isabelle and Brayden, who followed their mother with bags of their own, as I said hello into my phone.

"Cassie, it's me," Olivia said, "Listen, we're at the hospital to give Dad a blessing, but he wants his healing cane first. Do you know where it is?"

"Really? What does he need that for?"

I played dumb. I couldn't handle the additional stress of explaining my slide of hand with the cane. Perhaps this had worked out for the better, as Olivia became officially in charge of the ordeal now. And as long as she ran the show, my life would run smoother. She agreed to come to the house to pick up the cane, after first asking me if I would come, then

changing her mind before I had a chance to reply. I didn't bother mentioning Bekah. I would let Bekah tell Olivia about the break-up herself.

The kids slinked in front of the television in the front room. They watched with frozen faces, unreadable. Not exactly upset, at least. Not hysterical. I found Bekah at the kitchen table, pulling her dark hair off of her forehead. I made hot chocolate, though the thermostat read seventy-eight degrees. She stared into her mug as though she shared a deep connection to the brown liquid.

"I made dinner," I said, "But maybe you don't want to eat."

She shook her head, her eyebrows pulled tight by her fists in her hair.

"No."

"Did you want to talk about what happened, or do you just need some quiet?"

She blinked at me, fluttering, as though I had turned on a light. She looked just like our mother, though I tried to un-think it the second this thought surfaced. Our mother, dazed at the table, as constant as the blue fruit jar there on the counter. What had made her so sad those final years we grew up? I never wanted to know, but in this same kitchen, the ghost of our mid-forties mother revealed it all to us now.

"I don't think I can go back," Bekah said.

"What happened?" I asked.

She placed a hand over her mouth, as though attempting to stop what wanted to spew forth.

"What happened was...I woke up, I guess. Everything about my life, everything about the church looked so completely different to me. I tried to keep it all going. I went to church, to the temple, everything. I wanted everything to be like it was, to be safe again. I

prayed for it every day. I did everything that was expected of me, Cassie. Tried to get it all back. But then I started to think, that no matter how bad it would be if I changed, it couldn't be any worse than this. This life I lived for all those years had become a lie."

My tear plopped onto the table. Bekah stopped, studied my face carefully, perhaps waiting for me to speak. I didn't. My knees trembled, and I clamped my palms over them beneath the rough oak of the table edge.

"After I dropped Dad off at the hospital, I sat in the parking lot and cried and prayed. There was nothing. I felt nothing. But there was something else, too. A peace I never felt before. A part of myself hovering above my body, like a guardian angel almost. Then I went home and told Jared I didn't think I could do church anymore. And he tried to make me feel like a failure. And it worked. I did. I felt like a failure. But this time, I was angry too. Angry at him for trying to make me feel that way. And angry at myself for feeling it."

"But you tried so hard," I said, "Didn't he see that?"

"The only thing he saw was that I was giving up."

Too exhausted to cry, she drummed her fingers against the table and pressed her eyes shut. "Let's go out," I said, "Let's pull some weeds."

I offered an apology over the state of the watermelon patch. We nearly had to part the weeds to find the plants. Bekah ignored me and settled into the end of a row, gathering weeds near the soil, leaning into her elbows and lifting violent, jerking fistfuls as the roots finally gave way. She didn't stop to complain about the dry soil. I found the hose a few rows down and flipped the coupler, flooding first Bekah's spot, then further down the row for myself. The cloudless sky rippled above us, a dripping blue curtain as thin as the veil

separating our world from the mysteries beyond. For some, God lingered there and for others, a vast space of suspended matter taunting us with lifelessness.

“There are so many of them,” I said of the weeds.

“Yes, it’s almost pointless, isn’t it?”

I wrapped my bare fingers around the tentacles of a tall weed, my palm tickled by the soft green feathers of spires, watched its long shadow slink from the quiet plant resting beneath as I yanked the roots free. I laid the weed on a clean spot in the aisle, its roots white and naked and horrid, knotted and crooked and fused together in places, the limbs of a decrepit old man. I wrenched his brothers from their circle, and the watermelon stems now lay as the centerpiece of the garden, their fat, soft leaves trellising along the ground, nesting, a small, green fetus of fruit tucked beneath its canopy.

“You know what I used to think?” Bekah asked.

Bekah stared down into her work, unconcerned about eye contact. I waited, listening, reverent, certain that even the sand could talk to us.

“I used to think that women were happy. I thought I was the one with the problem. Other women were better, more capable of being happy. And maybe I’m wrong. Maybe women really are happy, and it’s just me. But I just don’t believe that anymore. I believe as long as women are expected to sacrifice themselves, they won’t be happy.”

“But you have a job,” I said. Somehow, Bekah had uncovered the very bell that rung inside me, a distant toll I had learned to bury for years until just recently, until Taryn had given us the book. But I had no idea how Bekah, who possessed so much of what I felt I needed, had uncovered it.

“But the expectations have not changed,” she said.

Her face shot up at me; our eyes locked. I felt like a cat disturbed in the wild. She knew what I assumed about her, and this aggravated her rage, though I sensed she didn't direct it at me.

"We both worked, but the expectations stayed the same. The house, the kids, the meals. It was all on me. Jared never felt bad about it. And people at church were even worse. It was important for me to feel a tremendous amount of guilt for not being home, regardless of what it did for me personally, or if it helped pay the bills. Whenever I talked about work, I was always careful not to let on that I liked it. That offended people more than anything."

A vague sense of guilt swept through me as I drifted from Bekah's issues and into my own. I tried to imagine Garrett doing housework, and I nearly laughed. The cost of my personal growth exceeded far more than I had considered. The four plants we had uncovered so far lay in the sun, cleared to thrive, but I allowed my eyes to continue into the field.

"There's too many," I said, "We won't get anywhere. This will take weeks. By the time we finish, the weeds will be up again."

Bekah jumped at the slam of a car door echoing against the front of the house. Her lips whitened.

"Who is it?"

"Does Jared know where you are?"

"No."

"It's probably Olivia."

"Olivia?"

"She's coming to get the healing cane. Dad's been asking for it."

Olivia appeared at the side of the house, quickening her pace when she spotted us. Bekah let out a deep breath and draped her head over her knees.

“Is he going to call the police?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what he’ll do. That’s why I didn’t tell him. I left a note. I’ve been waiting for him to call me.”

Bekah hushed as Olivia drew closer. Her flipflops cracked across the sand in loud slaps, her eyes wide. When she reached us, she hovered, and we craned our necks upward, expectant, like baby chicks waiting for the worm.

“I saw Bekah’s van stuffed with all her things,” she said, “What is going on?”

“Bekah’s moving in,” I said, “She’s leaving Jared.”

“Leaving Jared?”

A long silence lingered between us. Bekah wrapped her fingers around a weed.

“Why?” Olivia asked.

Bekah chuckled, a puff of compressed air hissing through her teeth, fluttered her round cheeks.

“I’m surprised you would ask me that,” Bekah said.

Another long silence tugged at us. I resumed my work with the weeds, listening to Olivia’s hands swat against her arms as she crossed them.

“What about the kids?” Olivia asked.

“What about them?”

“I mean, are you sure this is the right time? I mean, Dad’s in the hospital right now.”

Bekah stopped working, her broad shoulders sinking to the ground. She looked up at Olivia for a long moment, her lips tight.

“Do I offend you, Olivia?”

“What?”

“Do I offend you?”

“Of course not. I just mean—“

“Then please, could you try just being my sister?”

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to do.”

“No,” Bekah said, “You’re sounding the voice of authority. You’re trying to list my fears for me. The same list I recited to myself for years. But I’ve decided I’m not listening to that voice anymore. And if you want to be my sister, if you want to be a good sister, then you will stop it, and trust me.”

Olivia’s arms dropped to her sides, and she puddled to the ground, her knees dropping in the dirt, her forehead morphing with veins and thick protrusions as the pain surfaced. She reached for Bekah, a single sob jolting her chest as she touched her.

“Of course,” she said, and I hardly recognized her. Broken. Kneeling.

“Of course I’ll trust you. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. To be close to you guys. My sisters are everything to me. Oh, why are we all so afraid? What is it that keeps us all so afraid?”

We worked the ground. Olivia forgot her errand and we worked side by side, down the row of watermelon plants, our voices buried somehow in the dark soil, in the mud clinging to our hands, in the faint tickles on our wrists from the thin tails of weed roots. Then it ended, the row, and we stood, and if I looked over the entire garden, a field of weeds covered the ground unto the ends of the earth, but if I stared down the row we had worked,

admired the bare plants, the freed trellises, I could suspend reality for a moment and marvel.

Olivia had fallen into a deep silence. Perhaps not an unnerving silence, perhaps calm and reassuring, but certainly different, and that difference called to me. She did not walk back to the house, but meandered slowly, without her air of urgency I had grown accustomed to since we were children. The exchange with Bekah had taken it out of her, no question, but what was *it*? Was *it* a strength or a weakness, and more importantly, did I possess *it* at all?

Olivia went to the bedroom and opened a suitcase, unpacking Bekah's things. Bekah sank into the sofa between her two children and stared at television, hypnotized.

"How long are we staying here?" Brayden asked her.

"For a while. A few weeks," Bekah said.

"What about school?"

"I'll drive you."

"What if we want to go home?"

Bekah looked down at him now.

"Then you can. If you want," she said.

"I want to go home," Isabelle said.

"Well, too bad."

Isabelle did not cry, or change the expression on her face, or look at her mother. How young she seemed to me with her long, smooth legs beneath her striped cotton shorts, and her round, supple face. And how old, too, with the resignation in her shoulders, the truth in her eyes. Whatever Isabelle felt at her parents' split, it was not surprise. She bore the look of a prisoner who had long evaded sentencing. Whatever fears she now carried, she had carried

them a long time. This I knew and recognized better than almost anything else. I was thirteen myself when the fears formed bodies and danced around my room at night. Olivia had told me to pray, and Bekah had shoved my arms into my coat and dragged me to the places I dared not go. “You just have to show your mind who’s boss, Cassie,” she said, and I envied her for being able to do things so easily, even now as she suffered, I envied her.

The cell phone rang from the bedroom and I heard the low mumblings of Olivia’s voice through the open door. She appeared suddenly, racing to her purse on the coat rack near the door.

“It’s Megan,” she said, “Something happened with Jeff. He told her he’s engaged. I have to go to her.”

Bekah rocked herself out of the sofa.

“Engaged? He wants to get engaged?” I asked.

“No, he *is* engaged. To somebody else! Bekah, can we talk later? I’ll come back. I hope you don’t think—“

“Of course not,” Bekah said, “You have to go. Send her my love.”

“And mine,” I said, as the door closed.

I lingered behind the sheer drapes at the window, listened the sound of Olivia’s sedan start up and watched the hubcaps spin as she drove down the street. When the car disappeared entirely, my brain fired, and the initial reason for Olivia’s visit rose up into my consciousness like a balloon released from being held under water.

“The cane,” I said, “she forgot it.”

“Call her,” Bekah said.

I found my cell phone in the kitchen and dialed, walking back to the front room as the ring purred in my ear. A loud, flat tune called our attention to the front door. A green light flashed from Olivia's cell phone as a computerized version of "How Great Thou Art" played from the floor.

"She dropped it," Bekah said.

"I better take it," I said, "She's going to be busy. I can probably leave her phone for her at the hospital."

I slipped into the darkness of my parents' bedroom, opening the window shades for more light. A deep sigh rose and fell within me as I pressed the thick wave of cotton shirts to the side, and peered into that dark hole in the corner of the closet. Faint ripples in the darkness appeared and vanished like the waves of a mirage. Though I knew I had found the black case that shrouded the healing cane, I wondered for a brief moment as I thrust my hand into the hole, if it could disappear. What would we tell Dad then?

My hand touched the canvas case, however, and the hard, unyielding rod could be felt beneath. I pulled it from the closet. I sat on the bed and pulled the ends of the canvas ties. The canvas wrap unrolled, the cane spinning and dropping to the floor with a thud. I set the wrap aside on the quilt and bent down to pick up the cane.

I wrapped my fingers beneath knobs in the oak. Supposedly, Joseph Smith's hair lay tucked beneath the seal. As an inquisitive eleven year old, I'd crept into the closet one day, unwrapped the cane, and tried to pry the seal loose with a fingernail. Dad caught me. He appeared like an apparition, indoors at midday, queer and startling, like finding Mother in the field driving the tractor.

"What are you doing with that?"

With his voice low and threatening, an emotion entered the room I had never felt before, an odorless fog of power and secrets synergized into a single mood that both excited and terrified me. I gripped the cane tighter.

“I just wanted to see,” I said.

He stepped towards me. Instinctively, I pulled the cane to my chest, and he froze, his eyes inflamed with fury at my courage, at my desire, at my need. I don’t believe it was my nosiness that incited him, but my resistance to his commands. His arms dropped to his sides.

“You don’t know what that is,” he told me. “You have no idea what power you are playing with.”

The cane pulsed between my fingers, alive. Was it my own pulse I’d felt? I often wondered when I thought on this moment. Whatever it was, my father’s words felt unshakably true, that I had somehow tampered with the unseen and unlocked a source of mystery.

“What is it?” I asked him, my elbows trembling.

I thought he knew. I thought he held all the secrets to the world. But as I waited for truth to be imparted to me, I detected the flash of fear in his face, the same look Bekah got when I helped her with math, the look of the disoriented, the misled, the lost. And then I knew he didn’t understand this power himself, and I truly was afraid then.

“Give it to me,” he said.

I relinquished the cane, thrusting it at him, jumped to my feet and darted for the door, glancing past my shoulder to see if he would chase me. He looked not at me at all, but stared down into the knob of the cane, his mesmerized expression forever stamped in my mind.

What’s going on?”

My head snapped up, and I shoved the cane onto the bed. Garrett stood in the doorway, his eyes wide. I could hear the girls' voices in the kitchen, the suctioned sound of the fridge opening.

"What do you mean? I was only looking at it," I said.

"I mean Bekah just told me she's staying here. And your dad's in the hospital?" he said.

I shook my head, fluttering my eyes. I had fallen into that deep well of thought again. It happened more now, every day since I had come home.

"Yes, he needs his cane. Olivia was here to get it, but she forgot it, so I'm taking it to him. He needs a blessing."

Garrett stared at me, and sweat beaded my hairline. All my faults felt nakedly exposed, though I did not know why. He stepped inside the room and closed the door.

"So if Bekah's going to be here, we can move home," he said.

"Right," I said.

"How is Jared taking it?"

"I don't know yet."

"Do you want me to start packing things up?"

"Not yet. Wait until I get back."

"Why is she leaving him?"

"Lots of reasons, I think. I don't think he ever really thought of her as a person. I think he just thought she was his wife. Life has been hard for Bekah," I said.

"She mentioned something about the church," Garrett said.

"Did she?"

I stood. I wanted to spin. I bent down and turned slightly, then brought myself up again. Garrett watched this, intent and silent.

“Am I losing you, Cassie? Am I losing you the way Jared is losing Bekah?”

“You can’t think that.”

“Why not?”

I opened my mouth, but no words formed, just the noiseless heave of a baby bird. I shifted between my two feet, back and forth, a hidden dance. I didn’t want to talk, I simply wanted away from him, and he seemed to know this too.

“You better go,” he said, “Your dad’s waiting.”

I wrapped the cane and fled, unable to sneak a glance at his face. I loved Garrett. This was all I knew.

In the privacy of the car, the light clouded around me, and a darkness descended from the outside of my vision inward, just like the way it did right before I passed out in the kitchen from the flu that one time, but I shook myself out of it, started the car.

Just before the freeway entrance, the panic seized me. I couldn’t breathe, of this I was certain. I would run out of oxygen and die, right here in this car. I would have a heart attack and a stroke. I would have a seizure. The darkness crept into my vision once more, and I gasped for air, clutching my throat, my wrists for a pulse, and when I looked up again, the flat face of a truck’s silver grill drove centered towards me. I swerved. The cane rolled off the passenger seat and into my lap. I felt the knob on my thigh through the wrap, and the world halted, slow and deliberate, as though this fractured space of a second could hold a lifetime. And in this flash of space before my life would end, I saw the bedsores of an old patient of mine, Richard, who had lost his legs in war, and no matter how I tried to keep him

turned, the bedsores came, always, until his death. “You are so kind,” he said to me every day, “Such a kind nurse.” And it was Richard’s face, a landscape of wrinkles and sagging flesh and hollowed, tired eyes filled with resolve and acceptance at his horrid fate, a dignified reception for the cards he had been dealt, that I saw in perfect detail before the car crashed.

A scream floated from me, up above my head, and lingered there, crying, shrieking, howling as the car hit.

TARYN*July 9*

Seth drove me to the hospital. I was in no state to drive. How bad? I asked Bekah on the phone. Bad, she said. Very bad. I bounced nervously in the passenger seat of Seth's truck, needing to be there already, dammit. Bekah had tried calling me all night, but I had left the phone off the charger for a day and a half, and it was dead. When I'd plugged it in the charger that morning, I'd had three texts and six voicemails.

Seth stared forward, intent on swapping lanes around cars, accelerating towards the next bumper, then braking. He didn't look at me as he reached over and grabbed my hand. I stopped bouncing, studied the light reflecting off his thumbnail. The dotted yellow lines on the freeway zipped beneath us, each one a meter closer. Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh. I picked at the torn Led Zeppelin sticker on the dash, noticing the gray interior for (it seemed) the first time. A corner of the sticker tore off, and I scratched but couldn't pry up another edge. I wanted to pray. The urge welled up inside me, uncomfortable and familiar. Unpleasant. *Not Cassie*, I thought, *Please not Cassie*.

My mother's death seeped into the cab with the air conditioning, fluttering at the windows with the wind. I had pushed her away these past months, but she was here now, or her absence was here, tugging at me, a wave of loss so powerful it had formed into a presence. She had rocked me when I was small, in grandmother's chair in the bedroom. I felt the warm hum of her voice in her chest. How I longed for that closeness after my divorce. It haunted me now, all that I didn't have because I had made a choice, though I didn't know what other choice I could have made.

Cassie always understood me. She never condoned my rebellion, exactly, but encouraged me with silence while Mother started in or when Olivia made a small comment. She understood, but we never talked about it, not like Bekah and me. How I longed to have that conversation now, and a dozen other conversations. Cassie kept herself hidden from the world, the unsaid her greatest weapon. I always believed she wanted this distance between us, but now, I wondered if she had simply been waiting for someone to knock at her heart.

We exited the freeway and proceeded through an endless barrage of traffic and streetlights, until finally, the University of Utah hospital came within view. The tower of hospital rooms hovered over the block. They were both in there. My father and Cassie. I had yet to visit him, and I had no intention of even worrying about him now.

When I stepped off the elevator at ICU, Bekah caught my eye while leaning over the nurse's station. Her face pale and faint without makeup, her hair in a disheveled ponytail at the back of her head, she looked as though someone had strapped weights to her. Her shoulders slumped towards the ground beneath her lavender t-shirt.

"How is she? Can I see her?"

"The doctor's coming," Bekah said, as she led me to Cassie's room, "he'll talk to all of us."

Olivia sat poised at Cassie's bedside, her face streaked with tears, clasping Cassie's hand in her own. Garrett sat in a chair against the wall across from the end of the bed. He bent over himself, his head nearly between his knees, the bald spot in the crown of his dark hair aimed at us. Cassie lay asleep, covered beneath an array of masks and plastic tubing, arm in a cast, her eyes swallowed by two black bruises. Her sandy curls lay oiled and unkempt about her head.

“What was she even doing on the road?” I asked.

“I forgot the cane!” Olivia cried out, and Bekah covered her shoulders with her large hands, hushing her.

“She was driving Dad’s healing cane to the hospital. Dad had been asking for it.”

An indignant hiss escaped through my teeth.

“What did he want that for?”

“He wanted to use it,” Bekah said.

“It’s my fault,” Olivia said, “If I had only remembered to take it with me.”

“No,” I said, “It’s my fault. I should have taken it when he offered it to me. None of this would have happened.”

“It’s nobody’s fault,” Bekah said. “Stop it, both of you.”

We stood around Cassie. Seth sat in a chair in next to Garrett as I brushed a thin web-strand of hair from off her face, fixing my mind to the rhythmic bleeping of the machinery. The black beneath her eyes melded into a purple, then a deep red above her cheekbones. Her freckles, once wholesome and youthful, looked garish and sickly now, the spread of an unnamed disease. Cassie. The only one patient enough to show me how to cook spaghetti after school. The one who carried me two miles when I broke my arm performing a cartwheel off a trampoline at Melissa Richard’s house.

“Is this the family?”

The doctor, a tall, thin and impressively neat woman, greeted us with a clipboard and ushered us into a small room with ceiling-to-floor windows. Seth whispered he would wait for me, and disappeared into the hall. Garrett, Olivia, Bekah and I situated ourselves in a row

across from the doctor. She looked at each of us in turn, speaking with her eyes as she pressed her orange glossed lips together.

“We performed about eight hours of surgery last night,” she said, “Your sister suffered a broken arm, a lacerated spleen, some internal bleeding, which I think we’ve stopped. The largest concern, at this point, is the brain trauma she has suffered. I’m finding minimal brain activity in her cat scan, and that concerns me. The chances of your sister coming out of this are rather slim.”

Olivia made a noise, a sharp, wail-moan, which she smothered with her palm. Her eyes simply leaked fluid, hardly tears at all but thin films of water covering her blue-green eyes, pooling at the corners. The doctor stopped. Garrett gazed out the window like a passenger on a bus.

“The first 48 hours are the most critical,” the doctor said, “If she’s going to come out of it, that is when it will likely happen.”

The next ten hours lagged in the vortex of the hospital room, the windows blackening with night. I told Seth, finally, to go home. I would get a ride with Bekah at some point, but I had to stay. He didn’t question my judgment, but brushed his lips to my forehead, his eyes red with fatigue, and left.

Garrett snored softly in the corner as Olivia rubbed lotion on Cassie’s feet. Bekah stood by the window and gazed into the black night, the distant glare of headlights fading in and out from the street. I looked at my watch. Eight thirty-six. We had a day left now, maybe less. Time ticked away, slipping beneath us with each sound from the life support. The rhythm of Cassie’s echoing breath through the mask grew as constant as the clock, and all of

it, the heartbeat, the wires, the oxygen, fell into a deep permanence. We were helpless against this, we all knew.

We decided to drive to Grantsville, to our parents' house to sleep. Olivia had already packed a night bag, and though I had nothing, we figured some things of Cassie's would fit me. Garrett refused to leave or take shifts. On the way down the elevator, Olivia said she wanted to check on Dad one last time. We stopped on the third floor. The lights were out, so Bekah and I lingered in the doorway while Olivia eased into the room, gently clacking her flip-flops to the linoleum floor. I heard Dad's masculine cough, the rough break of his voice, though I couldn't make out the words. I stepped to the side of the doorway and peered in. From the glare of the television I could see him blinking with half-open eyes, and the silver cap of the healing cane, across his chest, reflected off the light from the hall.

"He's got the cane," I said, "How did he get that? I thought it was in the accident."

"Olivia went to the wreck yard," Bekah whispered back.

"She did?"

I gave Bekah a look, which she received without glancing away.

When we got to the house, Isabelle was still awake, the light from the TV flickering in her zombie eyes.

"How's Aunt Cassie?" she asked.

"She hasn't woken up yet," Bekah said. "You should be in bed."

"Dad called. He wants us to stay with him."

"Is that what you want to do?"

"I just want to go home," Isabelle said.

“It’s okay,” Bekah said. “It’s okay.”

None of us knew what she meant by it.

We scattered to our designated places of the house, Bekah and her kids in the spare room, on the far side of the house, Olivia on the sofa in the den behind the kitchen, and me to our parents’ room down the hall from the living room, a place I would rather not be. Garrett’s mother had Cassie’s girls, but I found myself missing them here, as though this had become their home, and I assumed it had. I wanted to hold them, to touch Amanda’s curls, so much like her mother’s, or listen to Chloe’s passive cries for attention. That is what being a mother felt like, I supposed. To want to right the wrong of the world. To be foolish enough to try.

I slipped into one of Cassie’s nightgowns, a long-sleeved flannel much too warm for this time of year, and tried not to smell her in the laundry soap, or see her curves in the familiar snowflake print. I slipped between the sheets and waited for warmth to come. And just before sleep overtook me, as the waves of dreams passed in and out, coaxing me off, the top half of my body shot straight up, erect in the bed, and here I stayed, suspended, stunned, my throat rattled and dry.

I was losing my sister.

In the morning, I found Olivia and Bekah sitting in the kitchen over oatmeal. Olivia, fully dressed, hair exact, spooned splenda into her bowl, her back turned to me, her voice high in emotion, while Bekah sat disheveled in green pajamas. They eyed each other when I appeared, and the conversation departed, their voices fading.

“What? What is it?” I asked.

Olivia dropped her spoon into the bowl with a clank and reached across the table to grasp my forearm as I sat down. Bekah set a bowl of oatmeal in front of me. I shook my head.

“Coffee,” I said.

“Sorry. Don’t have any,” Bekah said.

Olivia’s hand slid down my arm and into my own. I waited.

“We were wondering how you would feel if we all prayed for Cassie this morning,” Olivia said.

They gazed at me in an almost synchronized fashion, the same patient frown tugging at their mouths, Olivia with her blue eyes, and Bekah’s, the color of coffee. Coffee. There had to be a little here. I thought I had left some the last time I stayed overnight, months ago. I stood and rummaged in the cupboard above the fridge.

“Of course,” I said, my back to them, “Of course I want to pray for her. I would dance naked around a chicken if you guys thought it would help.”

“We just didn’t want to make you uncomfortable,” Bekah said.

“No, I get it,” I said.

My voice snapped, almost without my consent. To assume I would not want to pray for my own sister stung, but I had done and said a lot of things to justify the timidity. Still, I could not shake the feeling that my sisters would somehow know me better; find the parts of me I could not yet see, and offer them to me. Maybe that trick would remain a phase from our youth.

We parked in front of Black Rock just as the sun crested the mountain. I paced Olivia to the south side of the rock, then lingered behind Bekah as she mounted the first few ridges

of the climb. We all knew the path well, the easiest way up in switchbacks. We leaned against the rock, placing our feet carefully, then rising. *Always rising*, I thought, as I felt the porous surface of volcanic rock beneath my fingers and palms. How different I felt when I touched it, as though the strength of the rock seeped out and passed through me. And if that were true, what else could be?

The wind played gently at the top, the sun dipped in streaks across the water. Even the brine stench could be pleasant with such a view. This is why we came. To mount the world, to conquer it while no one took notice. To gather up the earth and blow across a kiss, shed a tear, and give her back again. This is why we came.

Olivia dropped into lotus pose on top of the rock. Bekah moved to the ground in shifts, one limb at a time. I completed the triangle, tucking my legs beneath me, head bent, running my fingers over the layers of scales in the rocks. Olivia prayed aloud for us, asking Father to allow Cassie to linger a bit longer, to bring her back to us. Her earnest pleas stirred something inside me, a skepticism I guess. Certainly she had experienced as many unanswered prayers as I had, and yet she continued with this voice of innocence I couldn't even recall in myself from my faithful days. I felt young, or maybe I simply remembered praying when I was young. Still, a yearning budded, a deep ache for a higher truth to reveal itself to me, to calm the unkind waters of my jaded soul.

Bekah.

Cassie's voice drifted towards me on the wind, as though she had just scaled the rock herself. I opened my eyes to search the ledge in each direction, expecting to see her head appear, or perhaps a stranger. Nothing. Olivia and Bekah glanced at each other, then back at me, clearly interrupted. Had I disturbed them?

“Did you hear a voice?” I asked them.

“It sounded like Cassie,” Bekah said.

“She said Bekah’s name,” Olivia said.

“Yes!”

“I heard it,” Bekah said.

We lingered in three beats of silence.

Olivia cried out, “She’s gone. Cassie’s gone.”

Her fingers trembled as they veiled her mouth.

“We don’t know that,” I said.

But I stood immediately and started down the rock, my sisters following. We descended fast, careless, and Bekah slipped on the first switchback. The uncanny grind of sliding gravel immobilized us.

“You okay?”

“I just scraped my arm. I’m fine.”

We waited for Bekah to regain herself and then continued down the rock, mourning privately. Could she be gone? Even as I entertained this explanation of what I had heard, my good sense seemed to cry out to me. But I was sure I had not spoken it, and assuming I had, wouldn’t I have said Cassie’s name? I knew what I had heard, and they had heard it also, and so I went the rounds with my common sense again, around and around until we reached Bekah’s van. Bekah fished her phone from her purse on the floorboard and called the hospital. Olivia and I held hands, squeezing the blood out of each other as we braced for the news.

“She’s alive,” Bekah said to us, covering the mouthpiece with her hand and then dipping back into her conversation.

She’s alive.

Olivia and I collapsed into each other, a web of arms, laughing. We lifted each other off the ground leaning my way, then hers, dancing, spinning, our laughter sailing across the lake, and bouncing off the clouds.

Cassie’s hospital room smelled of flowers. I could smell them from the hall, and when we stepped inside, a tall, round bouquet of two dozen white roses rested on Cassie’s hospital tray.

“Oh my,” Olivia said, “How beautiful.”

Bekah picked up the card and read it aloud to us, “We were very sad to hear of your accident. We are praying for your speedy recovery, -the third floor nursing staff at Veteran’s Hospital.”

“Her ex-coworkers,” Olivia said. “That is so nice.”

Garrett sat slumped in the chair at Cassie’s side, his eyelids crusted and dark. Olivia woke him and told him to go home to rest.

“The missionaries are coming,” he said, “We’re giving her a blessing. She needs to wake up today.”

Garrett left in search of breakfast, with a vague promise to return. Cassie lay undisturbed, a sleeping vessel, her eyes sealed and still, her lips dry and mapped with crevices. The monitor projected her heartbeat in loud, consistent beeps.

“They said nothing changed this morning,” Bekah said, “Her vitals have stayed the same.”

“I don’t understand it,” I said, “What happened on the rock?”

“It was a miracle,” Olivia said.

“No, what we *need* is a miracle,” I said, “Too bad Cassie didn’t tell us how to get her one.”

“We should pray for her,” Olivia said, “That’s how we get one.”

“But we’ve already done that,” I said, “Suppose miracles do exist. Suppose it were possible. Sometimes people pray for miracles, and something wonderful happens, and sometimes people pray and... nada. So how is it done? What is the difference?”

“Through faith,” Olivia said.

We sat on this concept, peering at each other. Olivia looked at her hands, acknowledging with silence the incompleteness of this answer. The scent of the flowers mingled with the bitter sting of antiseptic. I sneezed.

A light, urgent tapping summoned our eyes to the doorway. Two missionaries in three-piece suits stuck their wet-gelled hair through the door.

“Did somebody call us for a blessing?”

Comical differences in height made the tall, blond missionary seem stretched and oblong, while the shorter one with the brown hair and the wide set eyes dwarfed beside him. They looked at us, eyes widened, nervous, as though our sister may already be gone.

“Her husband isn’t back yet,” Olivia said, “But why don’t you come with us and give our father a blessing?”

Orange jello dribbled down my father's chin as we distracted him from shoving a spoon in his mouth. He set the spoon down with a clang, brushed his chin with a napkin, and shoved the bed tray away from him. It rolled with momentum, striking the wall.

"Elders," he said.

His voice cracked, but he spoke with conviction. A fire lit in his eyes then, a glint, as though he could will himself back in time fifteen years, head home, and hitch up the plow.

"Dad," Olivia said, "They came to give you a blessing."

"Ah, yes," he said.

He pulled the healing cane from beneath his side and laid it across his lap. He watched the missionaries carefully as he did this, ignoring us daughters.

"I'm ready," he said.

The missionaries approached the bed, one down each side, then turned to face my father in almost military unison. They looked each other in the eye then down at the top of my father's speckled head.

"Your full name?" the taller missionary asked.

"Lawrence Alger Snow."

"And what is it you are suffering from at this time?" he asked.

My father wheezed with laughter, then progressed into a coughing fit. He hacked his lungs clear, heaved an abrupt chuckle and wiped his eyes with the side of a quivering hand.

"Well, technically, I'm suffering from influenza," he said, "But it's probably more accurate to say I'm trying to cheat death. That's why I have this," he said.

He held up the cane. The taller missionary, Elder Richards, I could read on his nametag, stared down at the cane and nodded, brushed his first finger above his top lip.

“Right,” he said.

“Aren’t you going to ask me what it is?” he asked.

“Dad, just let them give you the blessing,” Olivia said.

“This came from the pine coffin of Joseph Smith. His hair is hidden in the top of this cane. It’s a healing cane.”

The missionary blinked at the cane, brushed his palms on his pants. Brushed his lip again, and tried to smile. He looked at each of us in turn, as though expecting us to jump in and toss him a life vest.

“Wow...that’s interesting...”

For crying out loud, he’s just a kid, I thought, as he and the shorter missionary placed their hands on my father’s sun-battered head and closed their eyes.

“Lawrence Alger Snow, by the authority and power of the Melchizedik Priesthood, which I hold, I lay my hands upon your head, and give you a priesthood blessing...”

The missionary’s voice began to fade, as though I were being moved from the room on an invisible rolling table beneath me. This had happened a few times to me before, growing up, when I received a blessing. It had never happened when I had been present for someone else’s blessing, but the familiarity of this experience swept over me, and I would not have been at all surprised to open my eyes and discover myself twelve years old again. I had been barely aware of my father’s voice as he pronounced a blessing, going into an almost trance-like state, an oddly comforting place of dissociation. When I received my patriarchal blessing from the stake Patriarch at sixteen, I almost fell asleep and woke myself with a start when it ended. The typed version of the blessing arrived in the mail, and I read it to myself in

the solitude of the orchard, completely mystified by the promises offered to me if I “remained faithful.” I didn’t remember a word of it.

And this same dissociation came over me again, automatically, as though I had never fallen out of practice. I went there willingly, eyes closed, my eyelids illuminated from the light of the window, a purple staff forming in the center of my view. Within seconds, I identified the healing cane, its image imprinted upon my retinas, and a flash of white light appeared, bursting out of the form of the cane, and just as quickly, it was gone.

I opened my eyes, and found myself alone, everyone else quietly tucked away in prayer.

My father’s hands draped loosely around the cane, dry, covered in gloves of peeling skin and freckles. I could almost feel them warm and encapsulated on my head.

So few times in my life had I felt inspired, or felt what I would call inspiration. I rarely felt the comfort or communication from some deity, though it seemed others felt it easily (willingly, I thought). But as I looked at my father’s hands, truth sprang forth as though it had entered my mind from some outside source. I felt ignited, as though someone had entered my soul and lit the pilot light and turned up the gas. Every item in the room pressed upon me in perfect clarity and detail, as though it were the most important thing: the fluffed and torn edges of the lavender envelope of a get well card on the tray table, the slope of the clear tubing hanging against the back wall, the etched lines forming grooves on Olivia’s intent forehead, the texture of the pilling fleece on the cuff of Bekah’s yellow jacket against her wrist. Beauty and simplicity overcame me, and I felt my body sinking into my knees.

I forced myself upright, certain I couldn't explain what I felt or perceived and falling to my knees would draw attention. Elder Richards ended the blessing, and everyone awoke from the seeming slumber, gazing around at each other, giving Dad an encouraging pat.

"I don't know if Garrett is back yet," Olivia said to the missionaries, "So could you two meet us at Cassie's room in an hour?"

"Where is Cassie?" Dad asked.

"I told you, Dad. She was in an accident two days ago, remember? She's here in the hospital."

"Well, is she all right?"

"She hasn't woken up yet."

"Well, tell her to get better for me."

We parted ways with the missionaries in the hall, and piled into an empty elevator.

"Unbelievable!" Bekah said, "He wants Cassie to get better *for him*?"

"Oh, I think he just meant he wanted us to tell Cassie *for him* for her to get better," Olivia said.

"I have to talk to you guys," I said, "I think I know what we're supposed to do. I think I know what Cassie was trying to tell us."

"Really? What?" Olivia asked.

The elevator opened with a distracting ding, and we exited into the chaos of the circular ICU floor, charges wheeling a patient and two empty gurneys through the aisles, and nurses crossing back and forth between the central station. I leaned across the desk as we passed by, and the nurse, who sat entering data into the computer, paused her hands above the keyboard to indicate her attentiveness.

“We’re going into Cassie Harris’s room,” I said, “And we don’t want to be disturbed. Not by anyone.”

The nurse nodded, locked eyes with me for a brief moment, “You’ve got it.”

I closed the door behind us in the room, pulling the dressing curtain out to hide the view through the peering window in the door.

“Taryn, are you all right?” Bekah asked.

Bekah and Olivia stood at attention, waiting for me to say more.

“During, the blessing, I got this...I don’t know what it was. But it wasn’t me.”

“Yes,” Olivia said.

“And then it came to me, what Cassie was trying to tell us. It felt so incredible. I’ve never felt so sure about something I couldn’t possibly be sure about. It was...real.”

Bekah bit her lower lip with an intense smoldering in her eyes, as if she too could somehow channel into this moment by listening to me recount it. Olivia stared at me with her mouth slightly open, waiting for me to give her something to say.

“Cassie wants Bekah to give her a blessing,” I said.

Bekah drew in a sharp breath. Olivia blinked three times, then shook her head.

“Taryn, I’m glad you felt something, but I just don’t know if that’s what she was trying to say,” she said.

“How do you know?” Bekah asked her.

Olivia’s eyes flitted between the two of us. She took a step backward, and crossed her arms across her chest in a self-hug, her green nylon windbreaker appearing inadequate.

“We probably ought to wait until the missionaries can come and perform their blessing. Then if that doesn’t work--”

“If that doesn’t work then we can perform our lame-ass women’s blessing, is that what you mean?”

Olivia gazed at the floor, her green, nylon shrouded arms still wrapped tight around her.

“Women don’t have the proper authority,” she said.

A slow burn started in the pit of my stomach, idled in the back of my throat. I felt the sting of my unblinking eyes widening, forcing Olivia to look at me as I took two steps toward her.

“Say that again.”

I had to force the words out, harsh and weak groans of words, as though pain and communication repelled each other. Bekah put her hand on my shoulder and squeezed hard. I couldn’t shift my gaze from Olivia, every part of her offended me, the disheveled wisps of her stray hair around her temples, the permanent frown lines around her mouth, a thin curtain of tears across her blue eyes.

“It won’t work to get angry,” Bekah said, “believe me.”

“You were there,” I said to Olivia, “You were there when Bekah healed me. I was just a baby. I don’t remember it. But you were there. You saw it happen.”

Olivia began to cry in silence. Her face warped in agony, as though I had twisted her arm and pinned it behind her back.

“I don’t even believe in this stuff anymore. But you—you saw it! You believed it all these years! You claim to know better. And now you’re just going to stand there and tell us to wait for a couple of twenty-year-old boys--”

“Enough, enough!”

Olivia tilted her face towards the ceiling, as though she rose up from being held under water. She smeared her tears across both cheeks, a rouge of moisture, and a distinct calm brought her arms down to her sides, relaxed her shoulders. She nodded slowly, her expression transforming from torture to a resolved peace, a hard determination, and the ever so subtle glint of rebellion.

“Let’s do it.”

BEKAH*July 10*

There was a question of worthiness.

So much of my life weighed on me, like drenched drapes at the windows of my soul. I thought I had made the right choices. I believed my life had taken a turn autonomously from me, acted out on its own, and that I had simply thrown my weight into that turn and hung on. No matter where I went in my mind now, I found doubt, dressed in black, lurking in the corner. As sure as I was that God had spoken to me, as clearly as at any other rare moment in my life when I felt God speaking to me, I also doubted this revelation. My new truth brought with it the pain of disappointing others: Jared, the kids, my family, his family, the people at church. I would remain always the one who had slipped. But I could not crawl back into my old world, I found, even though I tried for a time. It would be an even greater lie than the life I lived before. And the doubt found me there, too, in the church, as I listened to all those things I had listened to before, and believed for a moment that nothing had changed.

But a Mormon man lives worthy of his priesthood, gets himself right with God before he blesses someone else. And this seemed a reasonable requirement for a woman, too, if she were to attempt it. But everything about God had now come under question. I was in the process of understanding a different kind of God, one who did not work through fear or control, but peace and love. I didn't know how I could be "right" with God when I had little concept of who God would be. I only knew that God was more.

I would give the blessing. It was my name we heard (for whatever reason) on Black Rock that morning, and it was I who brought Taryn back to us at her birth, though I was a small child then and this hardly felt the same.

We had no oil to bless Cassie with, I realized, as I dug through my deep purse for Jared's small keychain vial I sometimes kept. This had not been planned.

"It's not in here," I said, "I must have taken it out. I don't even remember the last time I saw it."

"We'll just have to do it without oil," Taryn said.

"Are you sure?" Olivia asked, "We could wait..."

"For what?" Taryn asked, "For the missionaries to show up? 'Hey, can we borrow your oil, because we think we're supposed to give her a blessing instead of you guys. Thanks.' Yeah, that would go over well."

Taryn paced in front of the door, guarding it like a prowling cat, her cork wedge sandals clattering across the floor. She stopped to peer out the small viewing window, balanced on one foot, then wiped her hands down her cotton shorts and smiled at me.

"Ready?"

"I'm not really sure how to go about this," I said.

"Just do what the missionaries did."

I nodded, took a deep breath. We approached Cassie's bedside together, a swarm of affection molding into a prism of shoulders and chests and arms. We touched her. Our hands lay in perfect asymmetry across the top of her head, a spread of slender fingers and red polish and soft, blue veins. My palms flared hot. I closed my eyes.

"Wait," I said.

My sisters waited. In that split moment before speaking again, I felt wholly connected to all three of them, as though we existed not as four separate persons, but as part of a greater whole. I would try thousands of times throughout the remainder of my life to recreate this feeling, but would never quite capture it the same way again.

“By what authority should I bless her with? ... ‘By Power of the Melchizedek Priesthood which I hold?’ I’ve never received it.”

I expected Taryn to admonish me for not getting on with things. Instead, her eyes sank deep into thought.

“Back in the day when women gave blessings, they gave them by ‘the Power of the Melchizedek Priesthood which I hold through my husband,’” Taryn said.

“But I don’t want to hold it through my husband. That doesn’t feel quite right. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be difficult,” I said.

“Well,” Olivia said, “When you go to the temple for initiatory, the women who preside say, ‘With authority.’”

“With what authority?”

“Just, ‘With authority.’”

“So it’s an unnamed authority?” I asked. Olivia nodded.

“Well,” I said, nodding my head along with hers, “I think that would suit me best.”

I shut my eyes again and sucked in a long breath, allowing it to ease back out through my teeth. I could feel my own pulse in my fingertips.

Cassandra Mae Snow Harris, with authority, we place our hands upon your head and give you a priesthood blessing. It is our hope that this offering of prayer in the Lord’s name is pleasing unto our Heavenly Father, and that He will hear the mourning of His daughters.

We ask that you be healed, Cassie, that whatever injuries plague you now will be healed and that you will be brought back to live in this time, with your husband and children, and with your sisters who love you dearly. We believe you still have work to perform on this earth and it is our hope that you will be returned to us. We ask for these things humbly, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen. Amen. Amen.

I resisted opening my eyes. I longed to remain in this moment, in the peace of a prayer acknowledging all our human limitations, soliciting intervention, but accepting the ambiguity of God's will. Olivia made a small noise, like a harassed gopher caught in one of the traps in the field, and then I sensed a presence near the door.

Garrett, holding a fountain drink, stood in front of the closed door, his mouth ajar. You would have thought from his expression that we were standing there naked. I had not heard the door and was just as surprised by his phantom-like appearance. I stepped away from the bed.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"We were...blessing her," I said.

"That's what I thought," he said, "Why were *you* blessing her?"

"We thought... We just thought..."

I had hoped Taryn would jump in at any moment to rescue me. After all, it had been her idea, her hard-nosed determination that landed us here. But of course, this was typical Taryn, the instigator of action, and the evader of consequence. Once, when I was sixteen and she was eight, she convinced me to climb up Hal Walker's Asian pear tree and pick us some fruit. And I was halfway up the tree, where a few unpicked pears dangled towards the center of the trunk when I heard the fateful tap of Hal's screen door, and the panting Ruth Walker

running out, and Taryn had already run half a mile by the time I glanced down to ask for help out of the tree.

“Look, I don’t know what this is about,” Garrett said, “If you guys don’t like the way we do things in our church, that’s your business. But I would appreciate it if you would leave my wife out of it.”

“Maybe Cassie would have liked us to do it,” Olivia said. Garrett gazed at her for a long, uncomfortable moment.

“Well, she’s not awake yet to say, is she?”

We all looked down at her, drawn to her empty face like the last of a sunset. And she was still.

We left Garrett alone with her. The nurse squared to attention in her seat when she spotted us from the nurse’s station, and brushed both sides of her head with nervous strokes of her hand as we approached the desk.

“It was the husband,” she said, in a thick, Puerto Rican accent, “I could not keep out the husband.”

“We understand,” I said.

“I see you pray through the window,” she said, “I see you pray for your sister. I knew the husband would want to see that.”

“You would think so, wouldn’t you?” Taryn said.

“Yes, I would think so,” the nurse said, smiling, the sarcasm eluding her.

“Thank you,” I said.

We walked to the elevators and gazed together at the unlit arrows above the door, waiting. The nurse smiled at us again from a distance.

“Well, at least the nurse appreciated it,” I said.

“I guess we shouldn’t have done it,” Taryn said.

“We had to try,” Olivia said, “We had to try to reach her somehow.”

The elevator dinged and the down arrow lit up, finally, and when the doors parted, the missionaries, Elder Richards and Elder Frost, stepped off. We said hello and then passed them to step into the elevator. They turned around, visibly disoriented by our departure, and I waved a halfhearted hand, and gave a tired smile as the doors swallowed us.

Through the metal doors I heard the faint ting of a Puerto Rican accent. *Sisters! Sisters!* And just as Olivia touched the button for the main floor, I told her to open the doors again. The nurse jumped up and down in front of the doors as they opened, as though she would not be visible to us otherwise.

“Sisters, come! Your sister! She is awake!”

We ran through the hallway as a herd, the three of us, the nurse, the missionaries. Then we trickled into the room, and there lay Cassie, Garrett holding her hand, her long forgotten hazel eyes, blinking, squinting down her chin at us. Her mouth bent into a half smile.

Cassie! Cassie! Her name became a song with a chorus of tears. Certain we had entered into some dream, I tiptoed across the room. We crowded about her bed and touched her face and arms, then we held her, and marveled. Indeed, she had come back, but this was not anything we could understand in a moment. It would take years.

I felt a nudge from behind, and when I turned around, Garrett threw his arms about me and held me tight, and I melted into sobs.

“Thank you,” he said, “Whatever it was. Whatever you did. Thank you.”

We parted, and squeezed each other's shoulders, wiping our faces, laughing through our cries. I caught the nurse's gaze from behind the bed. She stared at me intently, smiling, and ducked her head in acknowledgment.

"Very good," she said, "Very good. You have the gift."

When I drove back to the ranch to pick up the kids and take them home, Jared's truck sat in the driveway. My heart drummed against my chest as I parked the van beside it. For a moment, I considered driving away. Then Jared appeared from around the side of the house, in work boots and heavy jeans, his blond hair hidden beneath a Snap-On baseball cap. I felt safe behind the windshield, as though he couldn't see me at all. He rarely dressed like this anymore, and I felt transported in time, to the days when dairy cows occupied his thoughts. A year into college, he started to resent that life, his father, the demands on his loyalties. And we had wanted something better, left this world in search of it, though I often felt impressed that we had left behind the best life had to offer.

Jared opened the door for me, and offered me a hand as though aiding me out of a carriage. I couldn't read his expression. He perhaps looked tired, although there had always been an indestructible quality to his face, as though it were incapable of forming circles beneath the eyes or revealing any loss of color beneath the mask of freckles. He hid from me, refusing to look sad.

"I didn't expect you," I said.

"I thought I should come get the kids. You're dealing with enough right now."

"That was thoughtful."

We walked together past the door, and around the house to the field. Was he leading, or was I? I couldn't tell.

“It’s a mess back here, huh?” Jared said. We watched the thick carpet of weeds blow like the waves of a green sea across the field, the one naked strip where we had pulled just days before standing out like a flaw. We continued to the fence line, a decrepit gray row of wood poles my grandfather had stamped into the ground, and we leaned our arms against the highest rail, slowly, to avoid the splinters.

“We’ll get to it,” I said.

“How’s Cassie?”

“She’s awake,” I said, “she’s doing a lot better.”

“Really? That’s great,” he said. “How are you?”

Jared’s eyes shifted, switching mechanically as he probed my own expression. I had his full attention, an extreme and odd shift between us. I felt as though he simply studied me to learn my next move.

“What?” he asked.

“Well, nothing. It’s just that you normally don’t ask me how I am.”

“Of course I do. Am I really that big of an ass?”

I let the wind answer. The sun dipped behind the mountain, and the world turned gold, the field, the fence posts, the tractors, the skin on my arms. My life had become unbearable indoors, I realized, as I listened to the whispers of the leaves. And the ranch had a lot to say to me now, lots to catch up on after all this time.

“We gave Cassie a blessing,” I said, “And she woke up.”

Jared nodded in profile, far away in his own worry.

“I mean, *we* gave her a blessing. Me. Olivia. Taryn.”

Jared looked down at my body, then up at me again, as though sizing me up. Stunned, his lips froze, parted around his teeth with a hint of amusement.

“Garrett let you guys bless her?”

“He wasn’t there.”

“So you think you healed her?”

“I think God healed her. But yes, I think it was supposed to be me.”

Jared put one foot on the lowest rail, bent his arms over his knee, and looked away.

“Could you believe that?” I asked. “Could you believe God would heal someone if I blessed them?”

“Without the priesthood? Who knows? I wouldn’t say it couldn’t happen.”

“But it did happen.”

“People wake up out of comas all the time. It doesn’t mean God had anything to do with it. It could have just been timing.”

“But you do believe God heals people.”

“Yes.”

“So if Garrett and the missionaries had blessed her, and she woke up, then you would say it was God. But since it was me and my sisters, you doubt that it was.”

“Well, how would I know otherwise?” he asked.

I stumbled on this question, caught in the vise of his strict perspective. Perhaps I had been a fool thinking Jared would give some credit to me. He lived in a world where even evidence to the contrary was not really evidence to the contrary, and I began to understand that although Jared’s beliefs were both rigid and fragile, my own were as well. His beliefs

were carved by others, whereas mine had grown out of myself, but they were equally vulnerable to skepticism, and I didn't know what to do with that, or with us.

"There was something else," I said, "We went to Black Rock this morning. And we heard Cassie's voice. All three of us heard it. We thought she might be dead. She said 'Bekah.' We all heard it."

"And you thought she was trying to tell you to use the priesthood?"

"No. Not exactly. I don't know what she was trying to tell us. I just know it was significant. How could all of us hear it at the same time if it wasn't real?"

Jared laughed, then recovered, as though his amusement had flown out despite himself, like a difficult calf out of the chute, and he had roped it in one swing and yanked it back.

"I don't know," he said, "It sort of sounds like mass hysteria. I mean, you're asking me here to make sense of things that don't really make sense. You realize that, right?"

"It was real," I said, and I cried although I despised myself for it.

Jared took this opportunity to put his arms around me, smashing my cheek against a plastic button on his cotton shirt. Heaven help me, it felt good to be held. Perhaps this is what life is, to have joy and pain pour out from the same source.

"This isn't how I wanted things to go," he said. "I came here to talk to you, to tell you how much I love you and that I want you to come home."

"What do you admire in me, Jared?" I asked. "Is there anything?"

"Of course I admire you! You're a fantastic mother. You're a patient wife. You put up with so much from me."

"I mean me, the person. Bekah. The part of me that's not a wife and mother."

“But that is who you are. It’s a very important part.”

“But that isn’t all that I am. Isn’t there anything else you could admire in me?”

“Of course. You’re very... creative. And happy.”

“I’m not happy.”

“Well, until recently. Don’t you see that you’re making yourself miserable with all of this? How can it be right when you’re so unhappy?”

“But Jared, I really wasn’t happy. I was pretending to be happy. I could go back and pretend to be happy. Is that what you want?” I asked.

“If it would fix things, then yes.”

“And what would it fix?”

The back door to the house opened, and we spun around together. Our two children tumbled out of the doorway and onto the lawn, breaking into a sprint towards us.

“Daddy!” Isabelle said.

Brayden wrapped his arms around Jared’s leg while Isabelle threw herself into his arms.

My heart stopped. Isabelle was thirteen. We had long stopped being “Mommy” and “Daddy” to her, and yet a primal need had somehow wedged its way to the surface. They wanted him. In this context it didn’t matter how much he had hurt me, or how little he knew me. My instinct had kept us together all this time, and it bore its head again, this instinct, flicked its forked tongue in my face until I backed down. Self-respect shriveled to a relatively minor thing.

“What are you doing here?” Isabelle asked.

“I came to get you guys. Are you ready to go?”

“Is Mommy coming?” Brayden asked.

“I promised Olivia I would wait for her,” I said. This was a lie.

I agreed to come later, to touch base with the kids, perhaps stay overnight to see them off to school in the morning. We could talk then, I told Jared, though I didn’t know what we would talk about.

They left me alone, and I started in on the next row of weeds. I worked until I felt the forming of blisters, until my hands bled green. Then I sat in the field and wondered if God kept a ration on miracles, or if I might be able to acquire one more. A speck of brown darted in my peripheral vision, and I sat complacent as a large hawk neared and circled me, the span of her brown feathers nearly translucent in the sun. She lingered for several rounds and I smiled, convinced for a moment that I somehow mattered. I gathered the pulled weeds in my hands, looked over the field where the landscape joined to the rolling peaks of mountains. I could see God there, in the crevice between the peaks, nestled in a sliver of light. There would never again be a question of worthiness.

CASSIE*July 16*

I was different when I woke up.

I didn't understand this at first, too distracted by my physical injuries and the disorientation of hospital life to notice any difference. The only hint of change I had in the beginning was a sharp yearning to put myself to work.

Shortly after I woke up, I asked for some yarn and a crochet hook. The doctors had promised to keep me at least another 48 hours, and I became antsy. Garrett brought a brand new purple hook and a spool of yellow yarn to me in a pink plastic sack. He would have captured me a blue morphus butterfly if I had asked him. I had not picked up a hook in years, but I longed to now, remembering my mother's dry hands as she demonstrated the stitch. At Christmastime we would sit by the tree with the TV blaring and crochet together. Somehow the accident had made that mother-sized hole in my heart that much bigger. *I will stitch a washcloth, and then a scarf, and then a hat, and some slippers*, I thought, though it took me the better part of a day to stitch half the washcloth with my left fingers only partially useable. It was not, I discovered, like riding a bicycle.

The pain came and went in waves, the effects of the medication chasing it away, then fading, and the pain surfaced again. Every muscle in my body seemed to hurt, my left arm stiff and awkward in a cast, and I dealt with a constant headache. I dosed in and out like an old person. Sometimes Garrett woke me, his face pale, and I would try to stay awake for his sake. Garrett's mother brought the girls to see me the first day. I smiled dreamily at them, and held them on my lap as long as I could. They had not been told about my coma, and so

they simply wanted to know when I would be finished with this hospital business and home to be Mommy again.

As it turned out, I would spend six more days in the hospital. My vital signs were quite uncooperative, and I had a few bad days with dropping blood pressure. The headaches troubled the doctors, but there wasn't much they could do about them aside from drugs, so on the sixth day, my sisters came to take me home. Garrett agreed to meet me at the house and left to round up the girls. He lingered at the door as my sisters crowded around me, giggling like a slumber party as they worked my legs into jeans. When I looked up again, he had vanished. We would be a family in our own house once again. I felt different about it now, undisturbed, though I did not know exactly why.

Bekah pushed the wheelchair to the side of the bed.

"Okay, Miracle Woman," Taryn said, as she smoothed my shirt over my stomach.

"You are ready for your throne."

Miracle Woman. The vague details of events leading to my recovery brushed through my mind. How could I bear to tell them I could not recall any of their story? I had no out of body experience, or if I had, it remained in the deep well of my subconscious. Oh, but they did not ask. They loaded me and carted me away from the bed like a wheelbarrow of watermelon. I cried for my hat, because my curls were a mess, and Olivia produced it with the flick of her wrist. They had such sympathy for me, my sisters, though they themselves did not suffer from curls.

They told me Dad was not doing well, and I insisted we stop to see him before continuing home. They wheeled me to the second floor and squeezed my chair through the narrow doorway of his room. He lay flat in bed, flushed, his eyes moist with fever, his lips

dry. He stared at me with hollow eyes, breathing, gazing almost through me until I wondered whether he saw me at all.

“Could you get me a blanket?” he asked me.

“You’re hot, Dad,” I said, “you shouldn’t have a blanket.”

“I’m freezing my nuts off in here.”

“Hand him that blanket,” I said to Olivia, “but just put it on his legs.”

She lifted the white knit blanket off the closet shelf and spread it over his legs, tucking it beneath his ankles. He continued staring at me.

“I’m busting out of here, Dad,” I said, “Why don’t you get better so you can come with me?”

“I think I’m dying,” he said.

“Don’t talk like that,” I said, “You’re only seventy-four. You have plenty of time.”

“I’m afraid that’s not up to me,” he said. “We’ve got to convince Him to change His mind.”

“What should we do for you, Dad? Would you like us to pray?” Bekah asked.

He shifted his head slightly to look around the room at the other faces, as though he barely now understood that all his children had come to see him. His eyes widened a bit, and he coughed.

“I have an idea,” he said, “I don’t know if it will work, but it’s worth a shot.”

He rolled with a winced grunt onto his side, and pulled from beneath his back, the healing cane. The light reflected off the varnished oak, sending me into a sort of shocked state. I covered my face with my hands and cried out, almost in reflex. Olivia wheeled me out of the room, and I felt better, though the tiles on the ceiling of the hallway spun a bit.

“The cane...I just...I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” I said.

“It’s alright,” she said, “that was probably a shock seeing it. It was with you in the car when you crashed. The whole event is probably coming back to you in flashes.”

We waited in the hallway together until Bekah and Taryn appeared. Bekah carried the cane in its black nylon wrap, eyeing me.

“What does he want us to do with it?” Olivia asked.

“We’ll talk about it later.”

I considered pressing her at first, certain it was me she aimed to protect with her silence. But then I kept my thoughts private, decided it could be good to let *them* deal with Dad for a while and leave me out of it. I had enough worries at the moment.

I leaned my face against the cool pane of the window in the passenger seat of Olivia’s car and watched my breath-fog spread through the scene of children bouncing in the backseat of an adjacent car. My sisters began chattering back in forth. I struggled to listen. I felt trapped in my weak body, but I did not dislike it. A certain calm came with the mandate to stay put. The pressure to work, to serve, to be, evaporated, and what remained was the simplicity of a distilled soul. Me. It left only me. In quiet moments of near slumber I understood how detached I lived from myself, and just knowing it somehow turned things right again.

“...So I guess if you can believe it, Mike would rather I had worked this whole time than be fetching his slippers for him,” Olivia said.

“How stupid,” Taryn said. “That’s so typical. Men just think the grass is greener. No matter what you had done up to this point, he would want something different.”

“Stupid sums it up all right,” Olivia said. “Stupid Olivia.”

“Oh, it could be worse,” Bekah said, “Try living with all your children’s flaws and problems being your fault because you had this selfish need for a career. That’s worse to deal with, believe me.”

“It’s ridiculous, isn’t it?” I said, coming out of my state. “I mean, you are a wonderful mother, Olivia. Really wonderful. Looking at you and your family, I honestly couldn’t be any prouder of you. And I have pride for what Bekah has done, too. But it seems like people would have you choose, like there’s a fence and you either have to be on one side of it, or the other. You either support mothers staying at home, or you support them working. Why can’t we support both?”

“I’ll tell you why,” Taryn said, “and it has to do with the church.”

“Yeah, well, let’s not go there,” Olivia.

“Yes, let’s not,” Taryn said.

“It’s wonderful hearing your voice, Cassie,” Bekah said, leaning over the seat, her own voice in my ear, “Really beautiful. Like music.”

It felt odd passing up Mom’s house to go home, like passing up my own child in the schoolyard. The glimpse of the weeds in the field tugged a bit at my heart. I had wanted to finish the weeding, I said. My sisters wouldn’t allow it now. They would make sure it was done, they said. I wanted to be well so that I could pull weeds with them. Our seeds had grown into our plants and these were our weeds, too.

Garrett helped me out of the car and into our gray reclining sofa in the family room, where I could sip water from my hospital mug and watch television. He shooed the kids off of my lap, and covered me with a fleece blanket. I shivered a bit in the chilly room, and

wrapped my good arm beneath the red fleece. Chloe planted herself in between the sofa and my side, her arm linked through my cast, and Amanda curled up at my feet, sucking a thumb.

“Do you want something to drink besides water?” Garrett asked.

“Some lemonade would be great,” I said, “I think there’s some mix in the cupboard, if it’s still there.”

“Do you want me to get it?” Bekah asked.

“No, you sit,” Garrett said, “I owe you one.”

“You’ve been saying that for two days,” Bekah said.

“And I’m going to keep saying it, because it’s still true,” Garrett called from the kitchen.

“Bekah is Garrett’s hero now,” Taryn said, grinning.

“Bekah is everybody’s hero,” Olivia said, “She is our miracle worker.”

“So Garrett,” Taryn yelled, “Do you think women ought to get the priesthood now?”

“Yep! I’ve been totally converted!” he yelled back.

Our laughter rang out, warming the room. My girls joined in, taking their cue from the grown ups.

“Lucky Cassie,” Bekah said.

Garrett re-emerged, balancing five glasses of lemonade between his arms and fingers, passing them out with a smile.

“It was the most amazing day of my life when Cassie opened her eyes,” Garrett said, “And if there was ever any doubt that God works miracles, those doubts are gone now. Give me your petition, Sister Jacobs. I’ll sign it.”

Uncomfortable with the subject, I asked Olivia to hand me the sack of yarn and the half finished washcloth. I struggled to accept that a God I mostly did not believe in would intervene on my behalf. But to hear Garrett side with my sisters with such sincerity provoked a need within me to appreciate them better.

I was too young to remember Taryn's birth when Bekah healed her, though Olivia and Bekah both remembered the event in great detail. I always believed it gave them an unfair advantage with faith. Throughout my life I had kept a covert skepticism that both protected and isolated me from others. Those messages that might have bothered me had I believed them were promptly tossed out, along with the idea of God altogether, and I was able to keep a tidy house that way. But when Bekah faced the ambiguity in the church, it completely turned her world upside down, whereas for me the world remained relatively unchanged. I envied her for that. And I envied them all for their gratitude in miracles.

I fell asleep before my sisters had a chance to say goodbye. When I woke again, it was night, the girls missing from me, the hall light leaking in to the room, illuminating the black tv screen, the plastic straw in my mug, the glossy magazine cover of *Woman's Day* on the end table. I called for Garrett and he appeared, so quickly he must have been near. I tried to find his face in the dark, but found only the familiar shadow of his thick hair and the white side of a jaw.

"What time is it?"

"Nine."

"Oh, it's still early. Are the girls in bed?"

"Yeah, I took care of them."

“Thank you.”

“We haven’t had a real chance to talk yet,” he said, “are you up to it?”

The dark offered a strange comfort, as though it somehow protected me from myself, from seeing how much I wanted from him, from taking a good hard look at us.

“I know. It’s been crazy,” I said.

He moved to the edge of the couch, put my feet in his lap. In the dark, he groped my good hand. My casted arm, awkward and heavy, dropped into my lap.

“I can’t tell you how long those two days were, when I had lost you” he said, “All I could think about was the arguing. And if I had another chance, I promised I would make it right.”

“I want to go back to work, Garrett,” I said.

No panic seized me, no crawling flesh, no worm wriggled in my gut. I didn’t understand what had changed exactly, but I understood I was different now. I could ask for things. This was my revelation. I could ask for things. Perhaps Bekah had worked a miracle on me after all.

“I know. I know you do. I’ve been thinking about it. A lot, actually. And we’re going to make it work. Maybe my mom will take them. Or maybe you could work the night shift. We’ll figure something out. I want you to be happy. That’s important to me.”

“You mean to tell me,” I said, “that all I ever needed to do to get everything I always wanted was to nearly die and go into a coma for a few days?”

He laughed, and then his shadow stiffened in the dark.

“I hate thinking of you living out your whole life just to make everybody else happy. Just to make me happy,” he said, “I hate that.”

“Really? Even I didn’t hate it.”

“Well I hate it. And I hate myself for not knowing that I hated it sooner.”

“Don’t hate yourself,” I said, “Just love me.”

He leaned forward on the couch, and his face fell into the light of hallway, his stricken, intent expression in full view, and my own eyes just flooded.

“I can do that,” he said, his voice hoarse, “I can do that.”

OLIVIA*July 17*

On a particularly hot summer morning, I gathered with my sisters at our parents ranch to weed. When I arrived, I found everyone inside, two floor fans running full blast, the back screen open, a hot breeze and a few flies blowing through. Taryn had tied a wet handkerchief around her forehead, sweat glistening on her collarbones. Cassie parked her wheelchair right in front of one of the fans, her curls flying in her face. Bekah sat behind the table in a large, in a white tank top and a green apron. I had not seen her upper arms outside a bedroom in sixteen years. I tried to look away, too shocked to stare at her. The healing cane lay across its black wrap on the table.

“Dad wants us to pry open the metal cap and take out the hair,” Bekah said.

A surgical array of sorts laid spread out across the kitchen table. A hammer, a large, flat screwdriver, a chisel, and three knives encircled the cane. This announcement was news to both me and Cassie, who sat dutifully in her wheelchair though she could walk fine, and had in fact spent the past three hours working steadily with Taryn and Bekah in the field before I arrived, her broken arm in a sling. She said nothing, but blinked as though an insect had flown in her face.

“You’re not going to do it,” I said, “He’s lost his mind.”

“He’s called about six times since yesterday. As soon as I came back here from Cassie’s, the phone rang and rang. I promised him,” Bekah said.

“He’s not going to let up until we do it,” Taryn said.

I resisted the urge to snatch the cane off the table. Insanity. This was insanity.

“Do you know what this antique is worth?” I asked, “There’s only one like it in the world that anyone knows about. We’ve kept it a secret because Dad wanted us to, because he was afraid the church might take it away from him. ”

“I wish they would have,” Cassie said.

“So you all want to destroy it?” I asked.

“We won’t destroy it,” Bekah said, “We’re just going to pry up the seal and take out the hair. Then we’ll nail it back down.”

“I don’t want to touch that hair,” I said.

“None of us do,” Taryn said.

“Isn’t this like grave robbing?” I asked.

“I think the grave robbing happened when they made the cane,” Taryn said.

“I can’t believe you guys are okay with this!”

“I don’t think he’s going to get better, Olivia,” Bekah said. “To me, this is his dying wish. I know he isn’t right in the head, but this is what he wants. And it’s his cane.”

The cane, varnished, nearly untouched, lay gleaming on the table. I did not often think about the hair, a troubling detail I had classified as trivial. Joseph Smith lay dead for seven months before they dug up the coffins to move the bodies. They had taken the hair from a seven-month-old carcass. And what drove them to do such a thing? The Holy Spirit? That didn’t add up for me, and what I had classified as a trivial detail became a horror I had long buried. But my father had not buried it at all. He had grown obsessed with Joseph Smith’s hair, so much so that he would ask us to dig it out and hold it up in the light of day. And now I could bury this detail no longer.

Perhaps without that hair the cane could be a beautiful thing.

Bekah sat in a chair, legs spread wide, the flap of the green apron brushing on the floor. She steadied the cane on the floor in front of her. Cassie wheeled closer to navigate. She would have been the best one for the job if she'd had both her hands. She understood physics better than all of us put together, and as a nurse she had acquired a steady hand with tools.

“Use the screwdriver first,” she said. “Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“I’ll get a baggie for the hair,” Taryn said, fumbling in a drawer.

Bekah held the knob of the cane between her knees, and worked the tip of the screwdriver under the edge of the aluminum cap which sealed the hole where Joseph Smith’s hair lay. She tried to pry on it, but did not capture enough of an edge to produce any resistance. She made several attempts before Cassie said, “the chisel.”

Bekah worked the chisel under the edge of the cap and picked up the hammer. I closed my eyes. A gentle storm eased upon us, a cool shock blowing through the kitchen, no thunder or lightning, just the private weeping of the sky. The smack of the hammer sounded three times, and I opened my eyes.

“There’s a crack!” I said.

No one would look at me. She had pried the cap up alright, it was bent down the center above the knob, but a small two-inch crack had slipped down the center of the cane. Bekah raised the chisel and hammer again.

“Wait!”

“It’s almost off,” she said, and then she smacked the cane again.

The horrific crack of wood splitting sliced the room, and the black gap deepened and dropped further into the cane. I nearly pounced on Bekah, and she pulled away like a cat, dropped the tools in two quick thuds and held the knob up to her eyes.

“I can see the glass,” she said.

Cassie, silent, presented her palm, fingers twitching. Bekah handed her the cane, picking the tools up from the floor as Cassie inspected it.

“Use the screwdriver,” she said. “Try to pry up the glass.”

I peered at the opaque, green image of the watermelon field through the streaking water of the windowpane, waiting as metal screeched against glass. I could almost hear Dad’s coughing in the next room. It did not seem possible for him to be gone from this house, but then, it had not seemed possible for Mom to go, either. In those first weeks following her death, I could hear her rattling a pan on the stove just to turn the corner and find Cassie there. Or I noticed the crossword lying out on a table, as though she had just set it down and stepped out for a minute. But her absence faded from an astute longing into a hollow reality. And soon it would be with my father, and then I would wander the house lost.

“It’s not coming,” Bekah said, “I can’t get the screwdriver in there wide enough. I don’t think even Olivia’s fingers will fit down there, and there’s a piece of glass over the hair. I can’t get in. I just need a little more room. I have to hit it one more time.”

“Don’t. It will destroy it,” I said.

Bekah bit her bottom lip and shook her head.

“I’ve got to,” she said.

“Well then we need to call Dad,” I said, “because I don’t think he planned on having the cane destroyed. We need to make sure that’s what he wants us to do.”

“I have a better idea.”

Cassie heaved a bit out of her wheelchair and pulled a bottle of wood glue out of the junk drawer, the edges of coupons and tattered mail overhanging the lip as she shoved the drawer closed. She plopped back into the chair, and eased a strip of glue into the crack in the cane.

“Hand me the hammer,” she said, “I’ll tap the cover back down, but not all the way so that it looks like we got the hair out.”

Taryn handed her the hammer.

“You’re just going to put the cover back? But we don’t have any hair to give him,” she said.

“Sure we do,” Cassie said, “Take those scissors out of the drawer.”

Cassie clutched the side of her own bangs, holding it out for Taryn. With the sharp snip of scissor blades, Taryn freed a lock of Cassie’s hair. Cassie slid the baggie from off the table, and dropped the piece inside, then sealed the bag and held it up for us to admire.

“Joseph Smith was a dishwater blond,” Bekah said.

“With curls,” Taryn said.

We would meet at the hospital in the morning, we agreed. Cassie would bring the hair. I would bring the cane. I drove Taryn back to her apartment, watched her beach shorts disappear up the staircase, then drove to my house in the avenues. The large maples in the front yard curtained the red brick of the two-story home. As I pulled into the driveway the trees parted and revealed the empty black eyes of the house. I wondered who lived there, and

if they were happy, if the family within had somehow managed to get something right.

Certainly if someone had failed, it could not be me.

Megan sat cross-legged in the front room in cut off shorts and a tank top. An array of floral and navy and pastel and plum and teal and seafoam blanketed the floor, revealing hints of the brown carpet beneath in triangles and squares where the fabric did not meet. Pantyhose and skirts and button down blouses and dresses. She folded a set of nylons into a square and placed them in a mounding pile. She had spent the last few days weeping in pajamas. The finality of Jeff's engagement to another woman had shaken her core. I had been afraid she would not pull out of it, but she seemed intent on accomplishing something now, her eyes dry and determined.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Deciding what to take with me, and what to leave here," she said.

"Why aren't you doing it in your room?"

"Because my room is a mess."

"You know, in a few weeks you won't be able to wear those shorts anymore."

"I know."

She continued folding, glancing up out of obligation, quiet.

"Is that Grandpa's cane?"

I looked down at my hand, having forgotten the nylon case.

"Yes."

"I hate that thing."

"You do? Why?"

"It's just creepy."

I sat on the red Victorian sofa, ran my fingers over the wrap, pressing the firm wood beneath.

“I don’t think my sisters like it, either. But it’s a part of our history. I don’t know. I think it’s kind of neat.”

“Are we keeping it?”

“No, I’m taking it back to Grandpa tomorrow.”

“Is he dying?”

“Yes.”

Megan placed her hands on the floor and hoisted herself up, settling beside me on the couch. She put her arm around me and said nothing. The longer we sat this way, the more difficult it became to obstruct my emotions. My face crumpled. She held me tighter.

“I don’t know what I’ll do without him,” I said, “I’ve always wanted to get to know your grandpa better, and I’m afraid I never will.”

“That isn’t your fault,” Megan said, “Grandpa was...unknowable.”

“Why was he that way?” I asked, “But of course, you don’t know. None of us do.”

“Maybe you will know him in the next life,” Megan said.

“Maybe,” I said. I brushed my tears and smiled.

“I’m afraid of the next life, actually,” Megan said.

“You are? Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, it’s supposed to be wonderful. But what’s interesting about that? If everything is wonderful all the time, what will we be doing up there? And there’s polygamy in the celestial kingdom. What if I don’t want to share my husband in heaven, you know?”

“It will all be sorted out,” I said, “No one is going to be forced to do anything they don’t want to do in the celestial kingdom. We will understand it better in the next life.”

“And that’s another thing. If we get upset something, then we are always told that we will understand it later after we die. What if that’s not true? What if that’s just something people say? What if we die and we find out that there are no answers for these questions?”

“Now you sound like Taryn” I said with a smile.

“You don’t think she’s right, do you?”

Megan looked older to me now, for some reason, a grown woman I didn’t really know. She frowned with troubled eyes and rubbed her knees with her palms.

“I don’t know anymore,” I said.

“What? Really? But you have to know! Out of all the people in my life, you are the one who knows! I need for you to know.”

“Of course I still believe,” I said, “But I thought I had all the answers. Life just doesn’t seem so black and white anymore, that’s all. Megan, you can trust your heart. I know that.”

“I think you’re amazing,” Megan said, “Standing up to your sisters for the sake of the gospel.”

I said nothing more, but set to work folding clothes, aiding her with the “keep” and “toss” piles on the floor. Megan possessed an intense faith and passion, and I did not want to shake that anymore than I already had. The mission was what she needed now. But truth be

told, I loved my sisters with as much zeal as I loved the gospel, and if forced to choose between the two, I don't know which I would pick.

I cooked dinner for my family. I had done this every weeknight for twenty-two years. On this night I baked French bread, my specialty, from loaves I kept pre-made, and cooked spaghetti and meatballs. It is an easy meal because I buy the meatballs frozen from Sam's Club and I always have them in the freezer. I stirred pasta while explaining algebra to Emily and I secured a picture Avery had colored of the temple on the fridge with a magnet. All of this was supposed to be repetitive and normal. But I felt a great sense of peace, being where I belonged as I ripped the heel of the bread and passed it to Mike. Even brooding James with his head ducked down at the dinner table, shrouded in headphones, lent comfort to me. I had chosen this. I had created this table, this family, this meal, and I had done it in the name of God. And it was good.

In the evening, though, when the children went to bed and I sat with the moonlight streaming through the blinds, black bars and strips of blue covering my arms and the white of my temple garments, that other family, the one I wondered about in the driveway, found its way back into my mind.

Mike came to bed late, and I listened to the swish of his pants drop to the floor. I reached for him as he sat on the bed, and he jumped.

"You're awake," he said.

"Sorry. I wasn't trying to scare you."

"Is everything all right?"

"For now. I was just thinking."

"About your dad?"

“Actually, about my sisters. About us.”

My eyes had adjusted to the dark, and I had excellent vision now, like a cat. I could see the porous fabric of his mesh garments as he crawled beneath the covers and folded his arms over his chest. He blinked at the ceiling.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “about the other day.”

“It was real,” I said, “You have been carrying it around for a long time. Don’t take it back just because it’s painful.”

“You’ve been a wonderful wife to me.”

“That is all I ever tried to be. So I’m glad you think so.”

“Are we going to be all right?”

“I guess I’ve always believed we would be all right. No matter what happens... What do you want, Mike? Be as honest as you possibly can. What do you want?”

He turned onto his side, facing me, his eyes flashing for a brief moment in the moonlight. I heard the sound of his lips parting and a bolt of fear flashed in me.

“I guess I want to feel alive,” he said.

“And I don’t make you feel alive?”

“No.”

I brushed hair from my face, my mind reeling through rage and pain and surrender, searching for the response that would make the world right again. I wanted to scream, but a seed of peace sprouted in me and I was somehow smarter than that now.

“All right. Thank you for being honest.”

He squeezed my shoulder, and this hurt even more, to be comforted and slaughtered in the same moment.

“But I believe you could,” he said, “Especially lately. Something seems different about you. You seem... calmer.”

I laid in silence, absorbing the moon, the soft brush of the comforter beneath me, the warmth of Mike’s hand on my shoulder. Some part of me had shifted. Even Mike had sensed it though I myself had trouble acknowledging the difference.

“That blessing was real,” I said, “And now I have to make sense of it. I mean, if this is true, if women can give blessings and heal, then why aren’t we allowed to do it? Why hasn’t God told our leaders to change it?”

“I don’t know,” Mike said, “If you look at when they gave blacks the priesthood, there was a lot of social pressure. It took them a while to succumb, but they eventually did.”

“So that’s how you see it? You don’t think God gave them a revelation?”

“Well, I think God gave them a revelation. But they had to ask the question first.”

“Mike, I think I might have the gift of prophecy.”

“I know you do. I’ve seen it.”

“But I will never be a patriarch.”

“No.”

“Why would God give us these gifts, but no way to use them?”

“It’s a good question.”

Some animal moved in the trees outside the window, scratching, scattering, catching itself from falling out of the branches.

“I know this is God’s church. I just have to trust it will eventually happen,” I said, “What is right and true prevails eventually. It always prevails.”

Mike smiled in the dark. I could not see his mouth, but I could see his eyes crinkle in that distinct way. Transported back in time twenty years, I slipped my arm beneath him and held him to me.

“You are actually listening to me,” I said, “I can’t remember the last time you listened to me.”

“I always wanted to listen,” he said, “You never wanted to talk.”

TARYN

July 18

Seth asked me to pose for him in the morning. Just for a minute, he said. Olivia was picking me up, but I had a little time, so I climbed into the tub naked as instructed, held a watermelon over my breasts. I turned the store sticker towards me. California, it said. Our field had not yet ripened and Seth had bought the watermelon last night, trying to make a deadline for a portfolio.

“What about my lower half?” I asked.

“It’s perfect,” he said.

He did not smile.

I hadn’t slept much at all the night before. My father crowded my thoughts. *My father. Twelve years served in the military before he came home and married my mother. Much of the family had given up on him ever marrying. My mother said he brought her an armful of wild daisies he had picked himself off the hillside. So many, she could hardly hold them, she said. I never asked him to confirm the story. I couldn’t imagine him picking them, but I enjoyed the thought of it, my father, young and romantic and unburdened by life. My father.*

“Can I talk to you?” I asked.

He stared only at the watermelon through the bathroom doorway, then back to his easel crowding the hall. He picked up his paint pallet from off the floor. Sometimes I liked talking to him as he worked, when he only half listened, as though I could whisper my thoughts to his subconscious and buy myself time as they soaked in.

“Sure,” he said.

Green paint. First light, then dark. The oval shape of a watermelon appeared in three clean strokes. *My father. He thought his job was to indoctrinate us with work and obedience and to extinguish any hint of playfulness. His voice would rocket over our heads with orders to gather the drip lines or feed the hogs or gather the eggs. The child within him appeared only once to me, on a hot day when I was ten. We didn't work fast enough and he turned the hose on us, his finger over the hole in a sharp spray, his laughter ringing out, as foreign as the sun in the night. And then he recovered, stood upright, folded the hose away, never cracking again. My father.*

"Everything that happened with Cassie turned my world upside down. I mean, I had everything figured out. I had God figured out. I'm just not so sure anymore. I think I might actually believe in God," I said.

Seth stopped working for a moment, and our eyes locked.

"I mean, nothing dogmatic," I said, "I don't think there's any way I could accept any specific doctrine. But still, this is huge for me. I think I believe."

Seth resumed his work, outlining the perpendicular oval of a face above the watermelon. He did not look back at me.

"I guess I was worried about what you might say," I said.

"Why? You think I care whether or not you believe in God?"

"So... You're saying you don't care?"

"Well, of course I care."

"But you don't have an opinion?"

Seth swished his brush in his water vase violently, and then dried it with a towel. He snuck a glance at me.

“If you say there is a God, then there is a God. And if you say there is no God, then there is no God.”

“My arms hurt,” I said, “And I have to go.”

“Just two more minutes,” he said.

“So you are so ambivalent about the idea of God, that you will just go along with whatever? I mean, I thought our common ideology is what brought us together.” I asked.

“No, you have that wrong,” he said, with such force he frightened me and he set down the brush.

“I’m not ambivalent about God. I’m religious about you,” he said.

“Now you’re just being stupid,” I said.

“Why do you never give me any credit?” he asked.

He folded his arms over his chest, tight, and his cheeks glowed a deep red. The watermelon weighed upon me and I hoisted it up like a sleeping child.

“Seth, I’ve never seen you flush before,” I said.

“It isn’t stupid,” he said, “Things happen. *Amazing* things happen. It all works through the subconscious, but what is the subconscious? I’m an artist, for God’s sake, and you didn’t think I would understand that? Maybe I wasn’t there. Maybe I didn’t see it happen. But I believe you. You are what is holy to me.”

My biceps quit on me, and the watermelon rolled down my arms. I grappled with my fingers, a hopeless attempt at rescuing the fruit. It crashed onto the white ceramic tile, splitting in two halves, seeds flying. The sagging flesh and thin juice eased across the floor. I swore and jumped out of the tub, slipped a bit in the mess. I picked up one crumpled half, the juice running down my arms.

“Freeze! Freeze!”

I froze, and held up the half, wanting to leave, clean up, but wanting to pay penance, too. Shivering, I pulled the fruit splashed shower curtain out from the tub. *My father.* Seth painted the bathtub, the curtain, the floor. He picked up a wide brush and painted black seeds, oversized black seeds, the size of cockroaches, in random across the canvas. *My father.*

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I need to learn to trust. What you said... Well, I wish I had half the guts to trust you the same way. I think it was the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said to me.”

“There, you see,” Seth said, and he turned back to me, smiling at his work, pointing at the canvas with his brush, “Sometimes it’s okay to let go.”

I left Seth to his obsession, showering in hasty swipes of my sponge cloth, then dressing atop a pile of clean laundry mounded on the floor of our bedroom. Olivia texted, “I’m here” as I hunted for shoes.

“I didn’t sleep,” I said, as I crawled into her white sedan.

“Neither did I,” she said, “I just got off the phone with the hospital. They say he doesn’t have much time.”

Olivia tucked the cane beneath her arm as we entered the hospital. Cassie and Bekah waited for us at the nurse’s station on the third floor. We gathered outside the closed door to Dad’s room.

“Me and Cassie were talking,” Bekah said, “And we think we ought to let the whole hair thing die, if we can. Don’t bring it up until he does.”

Olivia said, “I was thinking that way, too. Let’s pray he’s forgotten all about it.”

She tucked the cane discreetly behind her back, in line with her right leg, and then we entered.

My father lifted his eyelids as though it hurt, breathing rapidly through dry, parted lips. His cavernous cheeks fluttered with his breath, a pale gray mask over his skeletal face. I was not prepared to see him this way. Two days earlier he spoke with intensity, discouraged but still hopeful, sick but with a spark of defiance. Now his eyes drooped with the defeat of a beaten dog. And he lay there almost completely unattached to tubing, a simple heart rate monitor clipped to his finger, a few probes planted on his chest, as though his life were not at stake here at all, but a matter already settled.

“Daddy?” Olivia said, and that sounded almost comical to me, “We’re here. How are you?”

She pulled out her left hand and grasped his, pulling his gaze to her. His eyes fluttered, then focused on her. A quick glance to the side signified a vague awareness that there were more of us.

“Did you bring it?”

His voice choked and sputtered in a deep gravel sound, as though the throat alternator had quit.

“Dad, is there anything you want to talk to us about? Is there anything weighing on your mind?” Olivia asked.

He closed his eyes, took a breath. What troubled him now, in those moments of clarity? He had carried my rape around with him for ten years. Did he play it back in his mind in those quiet moments in the field? Did he ever weep for me? Was it this that drove

him to dementia? I believed he harbored guilt, but I had given up on hearing his admission. Or at least, I wanted to give up on it.

“Yes.” he said.

He took a few more breaths, quieting. Was he drifting from us? His eyes crumpled, twisting with pain and I could feel my own tears in the backs of my eyes, stinging me.

“I want to know if you were able to get the hair,” he said.

I should have been angry with him. And I was furious, but outraged at myself for believing he might concern himself over me. I wanted to walk out. I did, I turned my back on him. But Bekah caught me by the shoulder, her eyes found mine, and the great miseries of my life melted into trivial puddles in the face of such love. He would never fully comprehend or understand my pain. He would never get it. But *she* did.

“We got it, Dad,” Cassie said, breaking the silence.

She pulled the baggie from her pocket as she approached the bed, and pulled the tuft of her own hair onto her flattened palm. He plucked it out of her hand, pinched between his fingers as he held it up to the light.

“I wasn’t even sure it was really in there,” he said, “and now I know.”

“Dad, we came to tell you that we love you,” Bekah said. “Please, Dad, talk to us. We only have this little time together to be a family.”

“Don’t count me out yet,” he said.

His eyes fixated on the hair, mesmerized as he twisted it first one direction, then the other, as though studying a wriggling bug.

“The great prophet Joseph Smith,” he said, “the Lord’s anointed.”

He shoved the hair into his mouth, his lips squirming as he worked the hair back, then grabbed his water mug from his tray and took a long swig. Shock immobilized the room, the four of us, stunned, standing, staring, our jaws open, our hands at our faces. An itch of horror crawled over the base of my spine. I shuddered an involuntary dance.

“If anything could heal me,” he said, wheezing, “It would be that.”

He heaved over the side of the bed, hacking. Cassie caught the water mug falling from his hands and thrust the straw into his mouth. He tried to close his mouth around the straw, but the severity of his coughing prevented him from grasping it fully. He gagged and coughed, his face turning crimson. Olivia rushed out to find the nurse. Cassie pounded his back with her good hand.

The coughing ceased for a brief moment as he lifted his head and captured me with his eyes. Fear flashed in his face, and then an expression I had never seen before, a mixture of joy and surrender and desperation. Turning blue now, his lips quivered open and I braced myself for more coughing, but instead a word escaped.

“Helen.”

My mother’s name.

Then he sucked in a great breath, a powerful vacuum that gathered up the room, us daughters with our love and fear, the cane, the hair, the ghost of my mother, gathered us all up to sustain him. But it was not enough. He did not breath out again. His eyes fixed. His mouth dried into granite.

And that is how my father died.

BEKAH

The four of us gather together again for the harvest, having been thoroughly distracted from each other since my father's funeral. Cassie shows up fresh from work in her scrubs, a purple set covered in roses. Olivia brings a letter from Megan, still preparing at the Missionary Training Center, complaining about the food and the bed. And Taryn arrives with an engagement ring, an emerald cut in a pear shape. No diamonds. She was never one for tradition, though I know first hand how much she loves pears.

I split the first watermelon, my father's honor. Then I slice it up like a cake and pass it around. Each year, we work at getting sticky before we begin picking. Fresh watermelon grown in the alkaline soil of Utah have ruined me from ever buying one in the store. You can taste the purity of our well water along with the crisp fruit. My own personal snake oil for the soul.

We pick the sun-warmed melons, placing them on a boxed trailer hitched up to the four wheeler, and then one of the kids moves it forward, thrilled at a chance to drive the machine eight yards. We have to let them take turns to prevent fighting. Our children chase each other around the backyard when they grow bored, which is after the first twenty minutes, though I don't ride them the way Dad would have. Their shrieks add music to our task. I can hear Isabelle's laughter and it patches my heart a bit, thinking that perhaps I have not ruined her life. The kids seem more adjusted to the Grantsville schools now. Some days we sit by the fire at night, and I read Harry Potter to them and our lives feel normal. I commute for now, though I am actively seeking work closer to town, and with a little income from the ranch, I think I just might keep my head above water. I don't do things my father's

way, and although sometimes I can hear him in my head, grumbling, a part of me believes he would be proud.

We hitch the trailer to Dad's truck, an F350 extended cab. James, Olivia's son, offers to drive the crops in, but we say no thank you. I have something to prove to my father, wherever he is now, and I intend to finish the job. And also, we made a pact eight weeks ago, after the funeral, that we plan to keep. We leave Olivia's daughter Avery in charge and climb into the truck together, me at the wheel, Olivia riding shotgun.

"Did you bring it?" Taryn asks Olivia, after shutting her door.

Olivia holds up the healing cane, shrouded in its black nylon wrap.

"Did you think I wouldn't?" Olivia asks.

"Well, you were against it," Taryn says.

"Have I ever not done something that I agreed to do?"

A space of silence surrounds us, a friendly silence. Olivia can be stubborn, but she is certainly a woman of her word.

"And I have some news," Olivia says.

"You mean, besides the fact that Megan hates green jello?"

"*Yes.*"

Olivia turns around to slap Taryn gently on the knee.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Me and Mike are going to Europe."

"*You* are going to Europe?" Taryn asks.

"*Yes. Me.*"

"What brought that on?" Cassie asks.

“It’s time for me to do some things different,” she says, gazing out the window as we pass the field, “You either have to plant yourself where the rain is, or die out in the dry soil.”

“Isn’t that the truth,” I say.

“And what about you, Bekah?” Cassie asks. “What’s going to happen with you?”

“The only thing I am certain of anymore is that I am uncertain,” I say.

Olivia laughs a bit, glancing at me, distracted by the road. I don’t think she trusts my driving.

“I’ve been going to this little Lutheran church,” I say, “I’ve been thinking of entering the ministry.”

“I can’t think of anything more perfect for you,” Olivia says.

“Thank you, Olivia. Coming from you, that means a lot.”

I turn onto the road leading to Black Rock. Four gulls circle the landmark as we pull near to the shore. We climb, the four of us, the wind whipping our hair, the brine scent of the lake blowing over us. On top, the lake stretches out to the mountains who sit like guardians on the horizon. I come here because this is where I am most likely to find my connection to the Greatness. I’m not certain why the others come. Perhaps we each have our own reasons. It is our place of grieving, of communion, a platform for our fearless acceptance of the rest of life. It is where we find our mother.

Olivia hands me the healing cane. I didn’t see her unwrap it. She has engraved our parents’ names into the side of it: Lawrence Alger Snow, Helen Nancy Cleveland Snow. I run my fingers over the engravings, reading them as though I were blind. Then I hold the cane over my shoulder, take three long steps to the edge of the rock and thrust it at the world of water below. It sails, tumbling, the plummets with a gentle splash. The four of us gather in

a line on the ledge, our arms locked, a wall of sisters. The cane surfaces again and Taryn points. It floats on the salt, and drifts further from us, shrinking, waning, merging with water. Below, our truck of watermelon waits in a fabric of green orbs, and the cane disappears like the last of the sun at the end of day.